

NUMBER 42

\$7 CDN

\$6 US

cine ACTION



CHINESE FILMS

People's Republic of China

Hong Kong

Asian American

TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL '96

中國電影

cineACTION

42

THE COLLECTIVE

Scott Forsyth
Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe
Susan Morrison
Robin Wood

Design by Bob Wilcox

CineAction is published
three times a year by the
CineAction collective.

SINGLE COPIES \$7CDN \$6US

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

Canada and US

Individual, 3 issues \$18

Institutions, 3 issues \$35

Overseas add \$15

Mailing address:

40 Alexander St., Suite 705
Toronto, Ontario
Canada, M4Y 1B5
Telephone (416) 964-3534

Manuscripts (typed, double-
spaced) are welcomed. they
should be accompanied by a
stamped, self-addressed return
envelope. The editors do not
accept responsibility for their
loss.

The opinions expressed in
individual articles are not
necessarily endorsed by the
editorial collective.

All articles herein are copyright
February 1997 by CineAction
and may not be reproduced
without permission.

We would like to thank the
Ontario Arts Council, The
Ontario Publishing Centre and
The Canada Council for their
generous support.

CineAction is owned and
operated by CineAction, a
collective for the advancement of
film studies. CineAction is a
non-profit organization.

ISSN 0826-9866

Printed and bound in Canada.

STILLS:

Special thanks to Cinematheque
Ontario for their generosity.

FRONT COVER: Li Baotian in
Shanghai Triad

INSIDE FRONT: Maggie Cheung
in *Centre Stage*

BACK COVER: Ruan Lingyu
(*Centre Stage*)

INSIDE BACK: A scene from
Rouge



FROM THE BEGINNING, IT HAS BEEN OUR practice for each issue's editor (or editors) to select a theme of particular concern to them as a primary focus. A glance at the list of topics highlighted thus far is indicative of the editorial collective's varied interests; from *Neglected Films of the 80's* to *Screening the New World Order*; from *Sex* to *Scorsese*, and from *Gays and Hollywood* to *Style*. What we haven't done yet, however, is to feature the cinema of a country other than that of 'our home and native land'.

It is the intent of this issue to redress that situation by focusing on Chinese film—a theme that is not so much 'national' as it is 'ethnic'. Films in Chinese may be from the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. Films about overseas Chinese may be in any language; in the case of the 'Asian American' films discussed in this issue, in English, and from Canada and the US. And with the imminent takeover of Hong Kong by the PRC in July of this year, we might expect more crossovers like John Woo's, from Hong Kong to Hollywood... where do we then place a film like *Hard Target*? The *type* of film described by the term 'Chinese' is also very wide-ranging, from the earnest, serious, and politically constrained films characteristic of the PRC to those high-spirited action-packed, star-studded movies from Hong Kong, the world's third largest and possibly most endangered film industry.

In any case, it is our sincere wish that this issue will serve to introduce those readers unfamiliar with Chinese film to a heterogeneous cinema well worth following; and will present those who are already fans with further material for reflection and consideration.

Susan Morrison

Scott Forsyth

Submissions are welcome for upcoming issues:

Performance

Westerns

Films in Canada

Independent Films

中國電影

CHINESE FILMS

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

- 2 The Films of Ning Ying:
China Unfolding in Miniature
by Jerry White
- 10 Oppositional Politics of Chinese
Everyday Practices
by Monica Hulsbus
- 15 Music and Femininity in Zhang Yimou's
Family Melodrama
by Yanmei Wei
- 18 Allegory and Ambiguity in Zhang Yimou's
Shanghai Triad
by Shelly Kraicer

HONG KONG

- 28 *Centre-Stage*: Reconstructing the Biopic
by Julian Stringer
- 40 From Hong Kong to Hollywood:
John Woo and His Discontents
by Tony Williams
- 47 East-West Politics
by Patrick Tan

ASIAN AMERICAN

- 50 Asian American Filmmakers: The Next
Generation? Identity, Mimicry and
Transtextuality in Mina Shum's
Double Happiness and Quentin Lee
and Justin Lin's *Shopping for Fangs*.
by Edward O'Neill

TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL 1996

- 63 *Irma Vep*
by Susan Morrison
- 66 *For Ever Mozart*
by David Thomas Lynch
- 68 *Michael Collins*
by Scott Forsyth
- 70 Michelangelo Antonioni:
The Late Years
by Richard Lippe and Florence Jacobowitz

by Jerry White

THE FILMS OF NING YING: China Unfolding in Miniature

AMONG THE MORE PLEASANT, IF LESSER KNOWN, developments in recent Chinese film is the emergence of Ning Ying. Her two best known films are *For Fun* (1993), also known as *Looking For Fun*, and *On The Beat* (1995), both of which played at the Toronto Film Festival and have gained some North American circulation. Ning engages closely in both films with the way that men spend their down time, and the groups of men she chooses to evoke in such detail both represent neglected experiences. In terms of Chinese cinema as a whole, these films are unclassifiable, falling between traditions of "Women's Cinema" and what Paul Pickowicz has identified as "postsocialism." They are low-key portraits of urban life in contemporary China, painting it as a society struggling to come to grips with the changes modernity is demanding. For that reason, they are more relevant to everyday Chinese experience than the more politically pronounced films of her better known colleagues like Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou or Chen Kaige.

Indeed, Ning is, along with these three, a member of what is known as the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmaking, which is to say that she graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the early eighties. But while many of her classmates went on to prolific careers and internationally acclaimed films, Ning has worked her way up the ladder much more slowly. Since leaving the Academy in 1982 she worked in Italy, and eventually served as Bernardo Bertolucci's assistant director on *The Last Emperor*. She did not make her first feature film until 1990, when she completed *Somebody Falls in Love*. Further, while Fifth Generation filmmaking has been virtually synonymous with making Chinese censors angry and directors fight for their professional and artistic existence, Ning now finds herself in a fairly comfortable position within the Chinese film industry, having risen to be the head of Beijing Film Academy. This should not be seen as signs of complacency: rather, Ning's work is marked by a quiet but frequently biting social conscience. It is equal parts satire and ethnography, rendered with a cool, slow pace and a resistance to narrative climax that makes it quite distinctive from any Chinese films to have reached the West in some time.

FOR FUN

Ning's second feature, *For Fun*, explores the power dynamics that develop within a group of pensioners. This small pack of men spend their days hanging around in the city's park playing Peking opera, purely as a way of passing the time. When one of them learns of an opera competition, the group decides to undertake the significant effort of preparing for it, and becomes comically driven to win.

The film is significant for a number of reasons. It evokes the awkward position that pensioners occupy in China, a society whose traditions demand respect for elders but whose actual senior citizens now find their secure place of esteem being eroded by the changes of modernity. We see their day-to-day lives in great detail, and this attention not only gives a distinct voice to an increasingly marginalized experience but also makes for a narrative style that is slow and contemplative. In addition, *For Fun* serves as an allegory for the power struggles that inevitably result from organizations, or bureaucracies, no matter how small the stakes (didn't Henry Kissinger say something about that?) Structurally, however, *For Fun* is notable for the detail with which it renders the banal details of the day to day existence of these old codgers. We see a lot of them sitting around, a lot of the rehearsing of their operas, and a lot of their arguments, some of which contribute to the plot as a whole, many of which do not. What Ning is doing here is chronicling the way that men spend the time they have to themselves, and she does it with an extremely keen eye. It





On The Beat

should be noted, however, that this kind of interaction is especially important within a Chinese context. Sociologist Fei Xiaotong notes that traditionally in Chinese society, “talking, laughing, and showing emotion and affection openly occur only in groups comprised of people of the same sex and age” (86). By evoking the time spent together in this kind of peer group, then, Ning is getting to the core of Chinese emotional life. It is small wonder then, that she spends so much time with its small details.

In addition to this fairly unusual attention to the emotional, what is also refreshing about *For Fun* is the relaxed way in which we find out about these characters. The actors, as in *On The Beat*, are non-professionals, and the performances feel improvised (at the very least, highly naturalistic). Since so much of the film’s political and allegorical resonance comes from the group, it would be easy to allow that group to become merely emblematic. Ning chooses, however, to develop her ensemble not only as a metaphor but as a set of characters as well. This is a political film, but not one where formal concerns are subjugated in favor of all-important ideology. Because we get to know these men and gain a fairly three-dimensional understanding of them, the film does not become heavy handed. Rather, Ning creates a fully realized portrait, which feels clear-headed in the way that it takes into account the personal quirks that inevitably influence political and cultural developments.

One of the contemporary political and cultural developments that forms the film’s subtext is that, as Chinese society heads into modernity, it is leaving behind much in the way of custom—a difficult proposition in a culture that values tradition so highly. While William Parish and Martin King Whyte note that Chinese society has traditionally had few distinctions between urban and rural (10), Fei typically casts his comparisons specifically in terms of “modern and rural” societies. One of the subtexts of both of these films, is the struggle that Chinese people are undergoing in making rural models cohere to urban situations. Of rural and urban societies, Fei writes that “we would identify the first type of society as one based on ritual and customs (*lisu*) and the second one as based on law and reason (*fali*)” (42). What we see in both these films is the attempt, and in the case of *For Fun*’s idled pensioners, the failure, to feel like there is some reason for the rituals. When the cold, logic-based modern city cannot find a concrete reason for keeping old people as a crucial part of contemporary life, they leave them to while away the days sitting in a park.

What also has less and less a place in a modern, reason-obsessed society is as demanding and tradition-infused an art as Peking Opera. During the cultural revolution years opera was popular as a propaganda tool, but what the characters of this film are practitioners of is intricate, florid and resource-intensive stuff. Much traditional Peking Opera came under attack during the cultural revolution as being bourgeois,

For Fun



regressive, reactionary, although it no longer raises the ire of censors. Rather, it has experienced a slow, painless marginalization. It is dying a "natural" death, in much the same way that the unmarketable arts (which is to say all arts) are being left to die in capitalist countries. That Ning should show this in an era when China is trying to phase in capitalist methods and call it "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" is important: she is portraying art forms that are losing support, and while she does not face the kind of censure that she would have faced during the cultural revolution, this very advocacy still has an insurgent bite to it. These men with whom we spend so much time, then, serve as a kind of parallel to the art form that they love: they are antiquated and no longer part of the flow of contemporary life. Nobody in power wants to come right out and say that, because they do not have to. It's a mark of modern society that its less immediately profitable assets are left to die natural "deaths," and the intimacy that Ning achieves with these men constitutes a gentle but effective rebuke to this cold, *fali*-based point of view.

Indeed, an important part of *lisu*-based Chinese society is the respect accorded to old people and traditions, and the fact that the entire plot is structured around the rather dull lives of those who fight to keep pure Peking Opera alive is significant.

Writing about the place of older people in traditional Chinese society, Fei notes that "seniority is an extremely important principle in the way we address one another... if another term were really needed to characterize the power structure in Chinese, then I could not suggest anything better than 'rule by elders' (*zhanglao tongzhi*)" (118-119). Given this significance reserved for old people, it is especially important that Ning shows them to be so disassociated from the mainstream of urban life (these men are not esteemed advisors to the contemporary opera singers that they once were, but hover around its periphery). Modernity comes with the promise of an improved quality of life for all, but the marginalization that it brings the elders is, in a Chinese context, an especially harsh critique of its effects. The 1980s marked a point in China's history where the move towards modernity really reached a point of no return. Parish and Whyte write that "the effort to develop a distinctive form of urban life in China did not reach its peak until the Cultural Revolution decade" (17). What happened after that was not so much that cities gained prominence, for Parish and Whyte note that China has a long urban history, but that these cities began to take on a distinctively modern character, abandoning the traditions that Fei sites at the core of Chinese life. Rather than a light at the end of the tunnel in



terms of this painful struggle towards self-definition, what Ning shows here is boredom and irrelevance for some of China's most traditionally esteemed citizens. It's easy to gloss over the basics of the plot as bland, situation comedy-level material, but there is little question that it contains a stinging and contemporary relevant social critique.

Another important facet of the narrative is its value as a satire on the tendencies of contemporary bureaucracies. The regular but informal gatherings to sing Peking Opera come with their share of little squabbles, but they are essentially enjoyable for everyone, they are after all, doing it just "For Fun." Only when "institutionalization" occurs (a local club decides to give them some rehearsal space) and the potential societal approval that comes with a contest victory is at stake, does the group take on the trappings of a small modern cadre, with all its incumbent difficulties. The apparent "leader" of their small group has been a former gatekeeper at the Peking Opera Academy, and the rest of the retirees are former Opera singers. The expected class-based struggles ensue, along with resignations, the threats of splinter groups, and so on, although their conclusion is markedly understated. The men, after expressing some disappointment and surprise that they did not win a prize, go back to singing in the park. Their

infighting has been incredibly petty but this apparent triviality is Ning's satirical device, exposing just how deeply engraved the propensity for power struggles is within human nature, not to mention Chinese society. "Both the conflict and the cooperative perspectives on power are grounded in reality and are not actually contradictory. ...Some people think that power itself is the temptation," writes Fei. "What most people love are the benefits that flow from power." (109-110) Ning shows us a group which had been ruled cooperatively but which is now shifting towards a rule by conflict. What, if not the power itself, is to be gained by this struggle? A place in the community, and a direction for the future. This is not dissimilar to some of the rhetoric floated by governmental advocates of modernization.

Throughout its long urban history, China has always had a highly developed bureaucracy, which, as Martin and Whyte point out (10), precluded the rise of a merchant class. In addition, the slow "rise" of her retired opera singers make for a nice metaphor for Chinese modernism. They start out only in the shadow of the city, confined to more rugged, if also more organic, surroundings. With progress comes the promise of moving indoors, of getting with the modern age, of gaining social acceptance. But this acceptance comes with a heavy



apparatus, and just as so much of China finds itself slowly overwhelmed by petty struggles for power that have little to do with the tasks at hand, so these men find it all too easy to forget the actual singing in favor of obsession with the administration that surrounds it. Stultifying bureaucracy is a plague associated with socialist countries generally: see Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *Death of a Bureaucrat* for as eloquent a statement of this crisis as has ever been produced. While Ning's film is less absurdly comic than Alea's (which is equal parts Third Cinema and Buster Keaton), she taps on many of the same nerves.

After reading this discussion, one might go into *For Fun* expecting a serious political meditation on modernity. While these elements are all present, the film itself is a low-key, good-natured comedy, with its social critique buried under much concern for conventional entertainment. It's not at all unlike Iranian Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon*, which also buries its social critique deep, under the story of a cute little girl trying to buy a fish. It would be tough for anyone to object to as charming a film as *For Fun*, but at the same time, it's tough to miss the gentle sadness of these old guys as they try to cope with a changing society, and to wonder how the rest of China is getting along with these quiet struggles.

ON THE BEAT

Ning continues her concern with the urban realities of contemporary China with *On The Beat* (1995), a film that looks and feels much like *For Fun*. Her close observation of what men do when they don't have anything to do (as in *For Fun*, we see much sitting around and chatting) is a big part of the film, and again the pace is slow. Ning's overall project here is clearly the portrayal of a subculture, and while this was a significant part of *For Fun*, here it is given more prominence. But as in *For Fun*, there is much social critique underneath what appears eccentric and charming. Also like *For Fun*, much of the social trauma that Ning is exposing has to do with the attempts to make traditional (and sometimes fundamentally rural) models work in an urban society trying to deal with the unstoppable tide of modernity. In ferreting out the little details of police work, Ning does much to undermine the respect for authority which many ascribe to Chinese society, advocating more for what Fei describes as an "inactive government," more consistent with rural traditions. Indeed, there's a lot in this film that sheds light on the way that Chinese cities have been constructed and how they are controlled. It's a deceptively dense film, with much more going on here than a simple

portrait of Beijing policemen.

The film, following a few days in the life of a Beijing police squad, feels almost anthropological in places. As in *For Fun*, the actors are amateurs, in this case actual Beijing policemen playing both the cops and the criminals. While Ning spends some time in the neighborhoods of Beijing, most of the action takes place within the police station. There's remarkably little action (at one point a doctor blames their problems with a rowdy drunk on American movies), and the most exciting chase sequence involves a dog.

During one sequence, Ning illustrates the community-based model that the police still use, one that is run largely by women. Berenice Reynaud sums up the film as "an intimate view—sometimes chilly, sometimes humorous, always fascinating—of the relationship between the police and people in the People's Republic" (42). This community policing scene is certainly the kindest view of this relationship in the film. Before this, however, Ning introduces us to an older policeman and his younger partner, whom he has been charged with showing the ropes. By way of beginning the education, he takes the kid to a village on their beat, where they find a small community center which houses the community's resident/police relations board. They are all mostly older women, and are happy to see the older cop, having known him for some time. Such models are common throughout Chinese cities. Whyte and Parish note that this system was established in the 1950s because "residents were no longer in isolated families and alone but in cellular organizations, much as had been true in earlier times" (22). They also note, however, that "most residents' committee and residents' small group leaders are housewives and other middle-aged retired people, since these are the people who have the time to devote to neighborhood activities" (23). In contrast to the idle pensioners of *For Fun*, those who are older or generally not "marketable" find a central place in the community. These neighborhood cells are, then, very much a fulfillment of the promise of socialist organizing. Indeed, Whyte and Parish describe three measures characteristic of the "solidarity" approach to social control (as opposed to the more violent "deterrence" approach), all of which are on full view in *On The Beat*: "urban housing can be changed to promote more low-rise housing and more common space [small, closely assembled houses, as opposed to high rises, characterize the neighborhoods in *On The Beat*]... Neighborhood stability, homogeneity and associational life can be encouraged, and neighborhood offices of the police and city administrators may be opened to foster links between local groupings and higher authorities" (233). This feels odd for a Western viewer, since the police are not generally thought of as being stalwarts of progressive community organization. Ning, however, shows us a fairly utopian project for policing here. She is, of course, smart enough to show us how human nature inevitably gucks up utopia: we see some of the petty squabbling, bad mouthing of other neighbors, and so on.

As Reynaud notes, there is also much humor in the film, and one especially comical scene which turns deadly cold and biting emblematic, features a chase for a dog. Ning spends much time inside the alleys and backyards that form the tight-

ly constructed, almost maze-like neighborhoods of Beijing, and during a systematic search for illegal pets we discover just how elaborate the layout of these neighborhoods can be. The search focuses on finding one dog suspected of having rabies, and an entire squad of policemen is mobilized for this task. When they finally force the dog out a surreal chase ensues, one which winds up on a frozen creek where, in a sumptuous extreme long shot, we see the entire brigade slip and slide, but eventually catch the dog, which they beat to death in a bleak long shot. In this one sequence, Ning veers wildly between comedy and violence, and this unstable approach serves as an excellent summation of the career of a policeman. One of her projects throughout this film is satire of police excess, and there is no better example of this than the spectacle of so absurd a number of cops chasing a mere dog. But the beating serves as an unpleasant reminder of the nature of this work, and of the excess at which we had been chuckling. Police, no matter how good their community relations, are charged with violent work.

Indeed, what the illustration of this model based in rural and traditional life contributes to the film's overall project is that it shows just how schizophrenic a job these cops have. Although one of the policemen blames American movies on their woes, the post-Cultural revolution period has seen a significant shift in Chinese urban reality. Whyte and Parish write that youth "had been brought up to respect figures in authority and the Communist party, but the revelations of corruption, abuse of power, and illicit activities by those in authority that came out during that period [the Cultural Revolution] contributed to a growing feeling of cynicism about the authorities" (254). Despite these heightened tensions, the police in *On The Beat* spend most of their time worrying about stray dogs (in addition to the chase, there is a meeting to discuss banning dogs and an interrogation of a guy who is brought in because his dog bit someone). The most explosive situations they are called to deal with are domestic disputes. At the end, however, one of the policemen snaps and starts to beat up on the guy they're detaining for the dog incident, primarily because he's being non-cooperative. While this beating is far from Rodney King proportions, the cop is reprimanded, and over the closing titles the regulations guiding physical force are read. There is, in short, a constant fear of dread hanging over their work, but Ning shows that, more often than not, it is the police's own over-reaction that leads to actual violence.

Indeed, while it is more sympathetic than Western leftists might expect, this film is not an *apologia* for the Chinese police. Rather, it is an attempt, and a very thoughtful one at that, to understand the way that what is a fairly enlightened police system relates to the people that it has to control. This push and pull between cooperation and coercion is what gives the film its minuscule amount of dramatic tension, and Ning does not show the police as being models of community relations when it comes time to actually arrest someone. Indeed, the arrests in the film are characterized by sometimes brutal efficiency and, in one sequence, a comical attention to bureaucracy (reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, the police

insist a woman sign the warrant for her husband's arrest). Ning portrays, then, men who sincerely operate from a vantage of public service, but constantly come up against the realities of modern life: community squabbling, attention to ridiculous details, and the boredom that eventually leads to violent impulses in search of some excitement. Social critique is muted here, but it is present. Ning's portrait of the police is of a flawed institution, too bogged down to make good on its radical promises.

Despite this critique, Ning's hand is gentle, and she is very kind to those who she is satirizing. Indeed, after the sequence where the police beat the dog to death, Ning cuts directly to the modern apartment of one of the policemen. There, his wife is telling his daughter the story of the bad daddy bear who never does any housework, and the cop teasingly threatens to arrest all the child's friends. After another hard day of catching dogs, another cop is shown to get home late, much to the distress of his wife who is sad because he's not home enough. Any action (minor though it inevitably is) is always followed by the police sitting in their vans or cars or whatever, smoking and telling jokes. There is also a lot of time spent in the policemen's lounge, where they (surprise!) smoke and tell jokes. We see all aspects of their lives, and like the men in *For Fun*, get a very detailed sense of how through so much togetherness, they form relationships well characterized as intimate.

So the film, like *For Fun*, is a very skillfully assembled mix of group portrait and social critique. *On The Beat* never focuses in very deeply on a single character, spending time instead evoking the way that this group functions as a unit. Social critique, like in *For Fun*, is present, although to a certain extent submerged under a surface of being a fun little film about the police. That critique is there, and tells the viewer an enormous amount about the anxieties and frustration, as well as the small pleasures, of urban life in contemporary China.

THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

These two films, as befit many interesting works of art, don't fit neatly into traditional theories. The films certainly have a social conscience, but theorists of political cinema in the traditional sense are not likely to find a lot here. *For Fun* and *On The Beat* do not look much like the epic films of Ning's classmates Zhang or Chen Kaige. Neither, however, are they revolutionary or insurrectionary enough to be thought of as examples of Third Cinema. And even though they borrow much from the French New Wave in terms of camera work and free-wheeling style, they are nowhere near as bleak or confrontational as the emerging "Sixth Generation" Chinese films, which also draw much of their insurgent energy from the French New Wave. Nevertheless, there are two perspectives on Chinese cinema which offer some insight into the films and their place within Chinese cinema as a whole. One is "Postsocialism," a larger theoretical concept that has been applied by Paul G. Pickowicz to the films of Huang Jianxin (also a Fifth Generation filmmaker). The other important context is "Women's Cinema," which is used to describe the surge in filmmaking in the late 1980s by (and frequently

about) women. In even these cases, however, Ning's films don't quite fit: she'll keep theorists busy for a while trying to figure out just where they belong in China's rapidly changing film climate.

"Postsocialism," writes Pickowicz, "refers in large part to a negative, dystopian cultural condition that prevails in late socialist societies" (62). What these two films are addressing is very much concerned with this kind of dystopia, or the potential for it. Whether it's old men who feel put out to pasture because of modernity's unstoppable tide or the policemen whose routine is so dull and ineffective against real urban problems that they are ill equipped to deal with difficult situations, Ning portrays people alienated from their environments in a way characteristic of dystopic fiction. Reynaud notes that these films take place in Ning's "beloved Beijing," and while there is much affection for the city (especially in the closely knit neighborhoods of *On The Beat*), the place itself (with its urban problems, its unworkable bureaucracies, and its disaffected populace which clings to rural norms) appears to be the source of much anxiety. The city visions are very far away from *Blade Runner*, but they are equally far from *An American in Paris*.

In addressing this kind of social malaise, Pickowicz notes that "the idea of a distinctively postsocialist condition is best used to refer to the type of popular cultural confusion that became so pronounced in China in the 1980s" (61). This kind of confusion certainly includes crucial elements of these films: the suddenly huge generation gap, the conflict between urban/modern and rural/traditional ways of life. Ning's characters find themselves struggling to make choices at the same time that they seem to have fewer and fewer choices before them. The men in *For Fun* want to take charge of their lives, and think that they are doing so by becoming a more "organized" singing group. But it is just this organization that sends their lives careening completely out of control, calling into question just how much say people living in a bureaucratic society can ever have over what goes on around them. The beating at the end of *On The Beat* is certainly reprehensible in a down-with-police-brutality kind of way, but more fundamentally, it is the result of this cop's failure to deal with a breakdown in the respect for authority which is so important in traditional Chinese society. He simply has been left unprepared for this kind of surprise, and the aspect of Chinese society (Confucian in many ways) that insists on the search for control and understanding has left him ill equipped to deal with these kinds of logjams. All he can do is lash out at some hapless prisoner.

Pickowicz also writes that "the concept of 'red humor' (which he ascribes to film critic Chen Xihe) resonates more fully with the idea of a uniquely postsocialist art that comments specifically, and often viciously, on what James Watson calls 'the rigors of life under socialism'" (68). This kind of humor is certainly a key element in Ning's films, especially with her mocking of the bureaucracy that is a well known "rigor of life under socialism." This ribbing is present in both films, allegorically in *For Fun* and more concretely (such as in the above mentioned Gilliam-esque sequence) in *On The Beat*. The sequence at the community police station is also played for

some chuckles, as we learn that there are files there on what kind of contraception all the village women use and one of the older women makes the younger cop squirm at the suggestion that she fix him up. We see, in a gently funny way, that these stations are as much about fulfilling utopian socialist impulses as they are about women with too much time on their hands having their way with those around them. However, while this kind of humor is present in the film, it's important not to make too much of it: these are pretty much the only specifically socialist elements of Ning's satire. What she's making fun of here is equal parts traditional Chinese culture, contemporary Chinese Communist orthodoxy, and human nature. The concept of "red humor" helps to place the film, but it's certainly not possible to define these films by that.

Pickowicz also notes that in mid-1990 Teng Jinxian ascended to the head of the Chinese film bureau, and committed himself to replacing Stalinist principles within Chinese film. "Echoing remarks made by Mao Zedong in the 1940s, Teng condemned filmmakers who are interested in human nature. Such works, he intimated, dilute the class consciousness of the people and strengthen the hand of the class enemy" (79). As mentioned above, this is precisely the interest of both of these films, and in that way represents a move away from the more Communist-acceptable films dealing simply with class struggle. This is the way that Ning's films are the most "postsocialist," in that they do not conform in any way to the dull, social-utilitarian emphasis of so much Communist-sponsored art. *For Fun's* portrait of class struggle does not exactly show collectivizing efforts as the solution to problems, and government officials who expected *On The Beat* to be a promotional film for the police force were likely sorely disappointed. The simple-minded, heavy-handed and politically righteous films that are likely to please Stalinist, or indeed Maoist officials, are very far away from the thoughtful, psychologically concerned films that Ning is making. You want proof? Go watch a Chinese opera film from the mid 70s.

This concern with human nature, so reprehensible to Stalinists, was a key element of the "Women's Cinema" of the late 1980s. This refers to films made by women directors such as Zhang Nuanxin, Peng Xialolin, and Hu Mei (each of whom Chris Berry interviewed in *Camera Obscura* #18) which featured strong women at the core of their narratives. Summarizing a report issued by the China Film Art Research Center after their 1986 conference on the topic, Berry writes that "the definition of two broad categories is attributed to 'some comrades.' One is the 'expression of psychology,' and the other is 'going into society'" (11). Berry further notes, however, that "there is no reason why a 'social' film that represents a strong woman should not be simultaneously a 'psychological' film that explores the character of this woman, and vice versa" (11). It is this very simultaneity that Berry describes which Ning's films closely resemble, striving to understand both social and human dilemmas. The report also asserts that women directors "display more 'acute sensitivity' than their male counterparts, but lack their 'depth of maturity'" (Berry 10). While this statement arguably shows up the entire report as the product of male stereotyping, it does draw out the fact

that in contemporary Chinese cinema, women directors seem more concerned with emotional issues than their chest-thumping male counterparts. This is certainly true of Ning, whose films are throughout concerned with evoking the details of male-to-male intimacy, although it's an ironic fulfillment in terms of the women's cinema movement, which was concerned primarily with creating strong female characters to counteract the traditions of Chinese patriarchy.

Berry further notes that the films of the "Women's Cinema" movement are "intensely introspective" (15), which is not really true of either *For Fun* or *On The Beat*. Rather, these two films affirm the formal and thematic traditions of Chinese filmmaking which focused on the group, not individuals. Berry writes that in contrast to the new Women's Cinema, "the classical Chinese cinema... tend[s] to maintain sets of characters within the frame. Marginal placement of a character in the frame indicates a threat to this order... As a result, most films take and affirm a third person perspective that exceeds that of any single character and is not particularly identified with any particular individual" (15). These "classical" traits are all characterizing aspects of Ning's films: indeed, the emphasis on the group and the anthropological/third person perspective could be said to be characterizing attributes of her style. They are, however, in conflict with this "re-evaluation," and they make Ning look like her characters in *For Fun*, drawing upon and living by many of the traditions which some might now consider impractical.

NING YING'S SEARCHING CINEMA

While Ning's films resist easy categorization, they are still very much part of their specific cultural moment. She is making film at a time where much faith has been lost in socialism, and rightfully so given the corrupt and violent government that has been in place for so long. Ning, in both of these films, seems to be searching for a China that no longer exists, that perhaps never existed, but which displays many of the promises of revolutionary idealists. Respect for humanity, the strength of community, and the search for intimacy with your neighbors and your surroundings: these are the issues that drive these two films, and they are not so far from the promises of socialists throughout the century. Ning's films display a great grace and clear-headedness, attributes which have been all too lacking in so much art identified as socialist, to say nothing of governments that identify themselves that way. These are films of great hope, and of sad disappointment. In short, they are films about the modern Chinese condition.

Works Cited:

- Berry, Chris. "China's New Women's Cinema." *Camera Obscura*, #18.
- Fei Xiaotong. *From The Soil, The Foundations of Chinese Society*. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Pickowicz, Paul. "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism." In Nick Browne et al eds., *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 57-87.
- Reynaud, Berenice. "Toronto." *Cinemaya: The Asian Film Quarterly*, #30. 42-44.
- Whyte, Martin King and William L. Parish. *Urban Life in Contemporary China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

by **Monica Hulsbus**

On the Oppositional Politics of Chinese Every Day Practices

If a socialist society does not promote social and collective aims, then what of socialism still remains?

Mao Tse-Tung¹

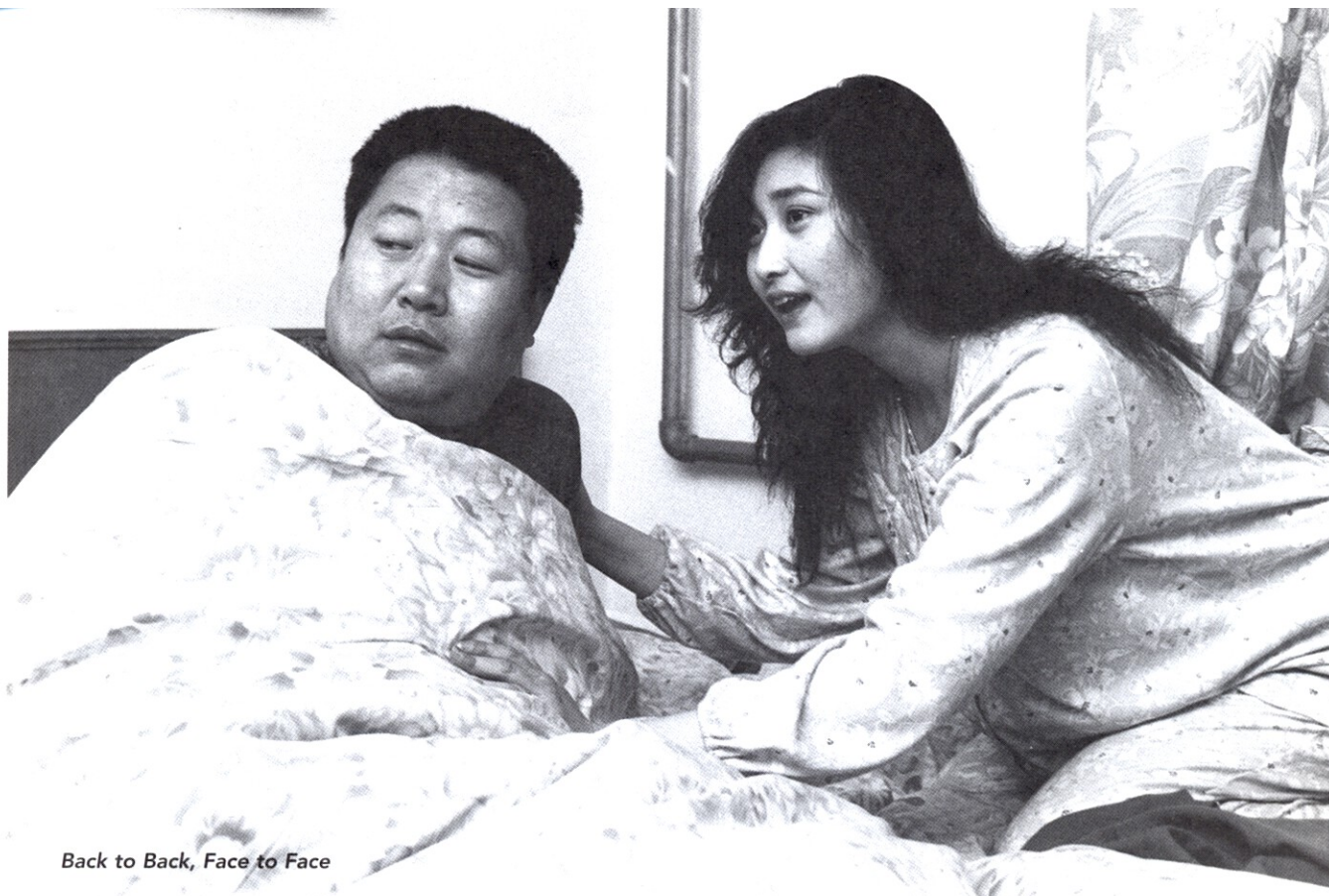
HUANG JIANXIN HAS BEEN CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST political directors that emerged during the turbulent 1980s in China. Placed within the Fifth Generation, Jianxin's films are unique in that they address contemporary socialist urban issues, mostly, the impact that the reforms launched after 1978 have had on urbanites.² Whereas Jianxin's films are difficult to locate in terms of ideological inscription, it is possible to think of them within what some theorists have labeled "postsocialism."³ This paper will explore the concept of "postsocialism" advocated by Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, and its connection not only to the social issues addressed in *Back to Back*, *Face to Face* (1994), but to its narrative structure. Briefly, in Dirlik's analysis, Chinese socialism shares the time/space productive homogeneity of western modernization that structures both capitalism and Marxism, hence it is and always was a hybrid socialism. Meisner's assessment of Mao, instead, positions him as a subversive thinker and practitioner of a socialism born not from the homogenization of Western time/space productivity since the peasants and not the proletariat were, albeit briefly, the protagonists of the Chinese revolution before it was stifled by modernization and the bureaucratization of a centralized and authoritarian Communist Party modeled after Lenin.

In recent years, Chinese urban economy has shifted away from a centralized apparatus relying upon direct bureaucratic allocation and distribution toward a market-based system where goods and services are distributed according to market flows, generating a space where both frameworks coexist

simultaneously. While profits were previously returned to the state—which in turn provided the necessary funding to cover enterprise costs—now firms are able to retain and reallocate them according to internal needs under a taxation system, as an incentive for local firms to increase their efficiency. Private enterprises have risen, though supervised and with some restrictions: privately owned hotels, restaurants, domestic services, educational and vocational institutions, construction crews, and farmers' markets are among some forms of private employment. Other sectors such as housing and health care facilities and services are also privately owned, while large state companies offer shares for sale to their employees and public as a way of increasing capital.

Enterprises have, in general, more freedom to hire and fire as opposed to the prior state labor assignment system but the state is no longer under the obligation to provide employment for school graduates, even when only one to four percent are now admitted to higher education. Employment is not permanent for those newly hired by the state—as it used to be—and instead a limited term contract can be renewed upon agreement between employer and employee. Firings, bankruptcies, and lack of assignments have generated unemployment which is nevertheless officially sanctioned as the price to pay for keeping good work records.

In addition, a policy toward opening China to the outside, capitalist world is aimed at attracting new technology, capital, markets, and training from abroad, and enabling China to perform competitively within a global economy. While foreign



Back to Back, Face to Face

instruction in languages and economics is imported, foreign exchange is pursued through massive translation and publication of foreign books and periodicals, and, recently through sending over 30,000 students to study in advanced capitalist, Western countries. Western cultural products from TV series to plays, films, and radio broadcasting are now not only permitted but encouraged as a source of information and instruction about the world at large.

Economic insecurity, however, and a sense that the changes introduced by the reforms constitute a threat to the social accomplishments of the 1949 revolution seemingly contradict an apparent yet uneven economic growth. Moreover, there is a widespread perception that the advantages pursued through private property and leasing of public enterprises to private managers have resulted in profiting from the labor of others, and that financial success and professional advancement is linked not with hard work, new skills and innovation but by misusing connections and power to personal advantage.⁴

Within the framework of an increasingly capitalist economy still managed by highly authoritarian Communist Party officials, Huang Jianxin's film, *Back to Back, Face to Face*, testifies to the ambivalence and anxiety with which urbanites adjust to the impact of the reforms. The opening sequence establishes the locus of enunciation in the private dimension of the home, and introduces the main character, Wang Shuan Li, and his family. Their domestic interaction anticipates the major strands of the story: Shuan Li shares with his wife, Lu Fan, his hopes of finally being nominated director of the Cultural Center after three years of performing as Acting

Director; his father, locked up in his room, cries for not having a grandson when state policy allows only one child per family (Shuan Li already has a daughter); and Lu Fan nags about having to endure both Shuan Li and his father's aggravations.

Next, an omniscient shot of the Cultural Center with a distinctly ominous soundtrack marks it as an other, alternate space. Panning over idiosyncratic, traditional architecture, the camera slowly zooms through the empty courtyard and into a meeting room while a voice-over conducts a poll as to who should fulfill the position of Director. Whereas, rhetorically, the camera and the soundtrack work tightly throughout the film along with the story, the treatment of this architectural space places it unequivocally and recurrently in a separate plane, against which the narrative acquires signification. While in the home and at work the grievances, aspirations, and interactions of the characters are portrayed through detailed and prosaic enactments, the imposing architecture renders it a silent witness against the activities of the employees.

1. Mao Tse-tung, "Reading Notes on the Soviet Union's 'Political Economy,'" p. 197.

2. I will be working in this paper with the reforms only in relation to the urban and not rural environment. For an excellent overview of the reforms in general see "Popular Opposition to the Reforms in China," Martin King Whyte, in *Marxism and Capitalism in the People's Republic of China*, ed by Peter P. Cheng. Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1989, pp. 37-54.

3. Paul G. Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism," in *New Chinese Cinemas*, ed. by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, Esther Yau. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 57-87.

4. Martin King Whyte, Op. cit. pp. 37-54.



Their comings-and-goings fracture its integrity literally and figuratively with their volatile schemes and machinations.

Casual and intended encounters in hallways and rooms inform us about the factions, wishes, alliances, and antagonisms among the cultural workers: Shuan Li and associates plot against a job entry competition if Bang Bang, Bureau Official Lung's daughter, does not get the job, which in turn will ingratiate Shuan Li in the eyes of Bureau Official Lung and help his promotion to Director. During the competition, where each candidate is supposed to support their application with some cultural product, the only applicant who is given narrative space in this sequence, Siao Ler Ler, eagerly declaims a poem praising the reform. The competition is finally declared null by the jury (who have pervasively jammed the scores) when Bureau Lung's daughter doesn't show up.

When Shuan Li finds out later that someone else has been appointed to the Director's position, he starts a systematic campaign aided by Accountant Li and Monkey, his closest

allies, against new Director Ma Fu Sheng, who is continuously assaulted by the most unbelievable obstacles. Soon we realize that, even while the reform is often commended, everybody cuts through the system's bureaucracy to make a deal with a reimbursement, a receipt, a contract, funding, loans, sabotaging or helping particular moves or initiatives. Uncovering, if not anticipating, these moves is what the job seems to be about, and hence supportive alliances need constant reinforcement through bribes and favors.

A correspondence is established between the home and work space: the characters' circumstances are played out slightly off balance when they perform small violations against each other—violations that will gradually increase in size with the unfolding of events. At home, Grandpa launches a scheme that will allow the family to be granted a second child if the first one proves to be disabled (by making his granddaughter drink tobacco-pipe water with the intention of rendering her mute). Shuan Li, with the complicity of his friends, is shown

at work overtly and covertly promoting his candidature for Director of the Center at the expense of antagonistic colleagues.

The style and manner by which Shuan Li and his friends at the Center (and almost everybody else) manipulate their environment for favors betray an acute knowledge of how the system works and their place in it. An-eye-for-an-eye, a-tooth-for-a-tooth, they are able to reverse—through an economy of means and a concerted and systematic effort—every adversarial move Shuan Li is confronted with on his way to becoming Director.

Regardless of the development we see in some of the characters, especially Shuan Li who, hospitalized with grief after two consecutive directors have been appointed, is able to let go of his need to retaliate, we end up with a feeling of being stranded. The film ends with Lu (one of the workers at the Center) knocking on Shuan Li's door to let him know that Yen (the current director) has run away with Siao Ler Ler, and that Shuan Li's presence is required immediately. He intimates that this time it really seems like Shuan Li will be appointed Director. Shuan Li hurries back with Lu to the Center and their disappearance closes the story.

It seems quite remarkable that at the point when Shuan Li has learned to live without his promotion, for reasons that have nothing to do with his qualifications, he could be finally appointed. In this way the film is open to two completely opposite interpretations: the most obvious one confirms a moralizing common belief that good things are bestowed to people when they are good and not before; the other refers to a bitter-sweet acceptance of the arbitrariness of a system over which people are ultimately powerless.

One might interrogate the reasons why Shuan Li is denied the position of Director when he had, in spite of all his petty schemes, poured his sweat and heart into the Cultural Center. Interestingly, that is addressed overtly within the story: Shuan Li's drive is recognized by high officials but the cohesiveness of the alliances behind him is perceived as a threat at a time when meritocracy and impersonal relations are advocated in the work place. Furthermore, releasing social and economic forces into the flow of a market system reduces the power of centralized control, hence bonding that cannot be penetrated by official surveillance must, of necessity, be discouraged. This issue has been one of central importance in transforming the economy from the personalized and stable environment Mao was able to create for all Chinese workers into an unpredictable and impersonal market system.⁵

There is a sense in the film in which the reforms are praised in the same way the Communist Party is, that is, as a fact of life. Expressing a favorable opinion of someone appears equivalent to saying that s/he is a "real reformer," much in the same way thirty years ago it would have been appropriate to praise "a real revolutionary." Characters seem to cope with the reforms like they cope with everything else: they outsmart what is destructive about them and they live with the rest. Hence, resistance is a way of getting even with what the system takes away and has, for them, a restorative and stabilizing function. Moreover, since resistance comes for the most part from middle managers and not from high officials, the film is

able to escape censorship to the extent that it serves as an arena of ethical debate with a pedagogical function. Further, since the opening shot establishes the locus of enunciation in the home, a melodramatic inscription emphasizing affective relationships might disguise a more subversive reading. As such, the story is about ordinary folks who are narratively treated with humor and compassion and who are brought, eventually, to maturity. Shuan Li is, therefore, finally capable of seeing the game for what it is and to put an end to it. Grandpa's little scheme is found out and, after a sincere apology, things go back to normal in the family.

Rhetorically, the film ruptures its narrative style through the presentation of the architectural body of the Center against which the film has to be read. To the extent that the Center's architecture is stylistically isolated, it stands as an alternative space we could call "China." This strategic space is in turn fragmented by a horizontal array of tactics that score in their unpredictability and ingenuity over vertical mandates. Similarly, insofar as the Chinese socialist state was conceived (according to Arif Dirlik) along the lines of the homogenizing force of modernization, it has now been fractured by the state of global capitalism, thus releasing its temporal/spatial contractual structure into an ever expanding grid of rapid transactions and back into the state social economy.

However, the recurrence of the omniscient image of the Center suggests an alternative route that corresponds to Maurice Meisner's evaluation of the socialist process in China. Meisner's perception is that Mao struggled (unsuccessfully) to direct China to a "Chinese" socialism during the collectivization campaign that culminated in "The Great Leap Forward" in 1958—with tragic consequences—and later during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. On these occasions, Mao was identified with an anarchist impulse reflected in the massive following by the peasants and directed toward undermining the authority of a centralized, hierarchical Communist Party system. Meisner argues that Mao flaunted, at both these times, a subversive strand of thought comparable to the early anarchist movement in Russia which did not necessarily conceive of socialism as a development from capitalism or even modernization if it was at the expense of the peasantry.

5. A profound ambivalence is apparent from recent polls inquiring on the sort of popular reaction this policy has elicited. When asked whether the unit officials should hire a stranger or a less competent relative, only 20% of the people interviewed agreed on the competent stranger being hired (*FBIS*, October 8, 1987, p. 18; Whyte, p. 50). Another nationwide poll in which technical and managerial personnel were surveyed indicated 37% favoring a strict managerial system that ignores personal relationships while over 60% opposed this sort of impersonal practice (*China Daily*, January 7, 1988, p. 4; Whyte, p. 50). In a national survey conducted within the PRC, people were asked whether, given the opportunity to shift to a job requiring harder work and insecurity regarding unemployment but providing an increase of pay and status, they would make the switch. 53.5% supported the reforms, answering positively, yet 39.3% said they would not (*China Daily*, September 28, 1987, p. 4; Whyte, p. 47). Ostensibly, it is not possible to assume that people believe a strict meritocracy is an achievable or even a desirable goal, or that the reforms are widely or unambivalently endorsed when a significant percentage of the population expresses a preference for security rather than for uncertain chances of economic improvement.

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 112-13.

Instead, Mao strove to maintain a balance between city and countryside while his source of inspiration was overwhelmingly the Chinese peasants.

If we were to look, therefore, at China as having accomplished, however briefly, a form of socialism that was unique and did not borrow from the Western time/space paradigm of an urban productive force, we might feel a certain awe when confronted with the mysterious presentation of the idiosyncratic architecture of the Cultural Center, especially when contrasted with the shortsightedness of its managers and officials. In this light, instead of a homogeneous, strategic construct (associated with a centralized Socialist-Leninist apparatus), an estranged, unassimilated space (evoking the anarchic moments of the revolution) can be perceived sporadically throughout time, haunting the time/space apparatus of the Chinese productive system—as well as the narrative structure of the film—with a disruptive presence.

The film could also promote a reading which does not emphasize the architecture of the building, but its phantasmatic aura. According to Deleuze, memory is frequently invoked in diasporic, hybrid film. Neither collective nor private, memory mediates the gap between the official and private histories of a people through a recollection of images. A recollected image, he argues, is like a fossil in that it embodies the traces of events whose memory has been buried. When such recollections are severed from their connection to the present, they become “strangely active fossils, radioactive, inexplicable in the present where they surface, and all the more harmful and autonomous.”⁶

The haunting, radioactive presence of the empty building evokes in this reading the traces of the anarchic seed that once endowed China with a vision of its difference. Elided from history, it lives not through memory but in the “harmful and autonomous” grid of oppositional maneuvers of a people deprived of adequate channels of expressing discontent. How could it be expected that a market system would accommodate the necessities of a people who (as opposed to capitalist societies) have no means of organizing and protecting themselves against volatile or unpredictable conditions of employment and count on their compliance with it? Under these circumstances, tactical oppositional practices become the only means if not to sabotage the system, to at least bend it to one's own advantage.

Yet it is not only from their past that the Chinese people have been cut off, but also from their future. Deng Xiao Ping has clearly stated that reforms are the necessary condition to a socialism that requires a capitalist infrastructure. In his analysis of contemporary Chinese Marxism, Meisner points to the fact that the socialist future to which it aspires has been so far removed from the present that it has lost all connection with it. When high party officials declare that “the aim of our Party in leading the whole nation, in making the revolution, and taking over political power is, in the final analysis, to develop the economy,”⁷ the socialist and communist goals of the revolution seem lost indeed. By continuously invoking the “objectivity” of historical and economic forces and subjecting socialism to their operations, post-Maoist Chinese Marxism re-

gates socialism to an undetermined future time, debilitating people's spirits by telling them that little can be done to hasten the process. Contemporary Chinese Marxism is thus conceived as an evolutionary (instead of a revolutionary) process of historical development, ruled by “scientific” laws at the exclusion of visionary intervention.⁸

Insofar as the narrative continuity of a nation's history has been disturbed, a disjuncture within its temporal axis has been created. “Strangely active fossils, radioactive [and] inexplicable in the present where they surface,” acquire the disruptive power of “the archaic [a liminal, uncertain state of cultural belief], that emerges in the midst or margins of modernity as a result of some psychic ambivalence or intellectual uncertainty,”⁹ splitting the homogeneity of a national discourse. The tactical, oppositional practices against authority in the workplace become, therefore, the irrational expression of an *other* time against the productive forces of modernization which remain thus suspended, without a past or a future.

The recuperation of the radical impetus of the revolution could, perhaps, restore a sense of continuity to the Chinese people. Nonetheless, radicalness is—much like the tactical oppositions of resistance in the workplace—by its very nature ephemeral, nomadic, and opportunistic. Radicalness, thus defined, has a distaste for proper objects, finding itself at home in the concept of *metis*, recuperated by Michel de Certeau.¹⁰

Metis was current in ancient Greece as a practical form of intelligence commonly seen among the arts. A combination of intuition, shrewdness, mental agility, sense of opportunity and a certain maturity of experience defines *metis* as a principle of economy: maximum effect through minimum force. Without a proper locus, it works through memory: drawing from a myriad of distinct moments of past experience, *metis* quickly synthesizes information from a pool of resources when an opportunity arises. It directs its forces according to events—artfully turning the unexpected into opportunities—and its effectiveness is materialized through casual encounters. Mobile and adaptable, it intervenes in the space of the other, altering external circumstances while constantly reconstituting itself with every move and encounter.

Since sensing an opportunity cannot be detached from the subjective move that makes use of it, *metis* is an extremely idiosyncratic practice. It can inspire revolutionary practice guiding its movement, but it dies when ritualized. Best employed as a corrective, oppositional stance against centralization and bureaucratization, *metis* lives in the memory of Mao's interventions. However, it is possible to assert that *metis* has outlived the revolution and that in the profound understanding of authoritarianism and its effects, it strikes back in current cultural production. Huang Jianxin's *Back to Back, Face to Face*, testifies to its influence.

7 Han Guang, “On the Development of Modern Industry,” *Beijing Review*, 23 March 1979, p. 9, cited in Maurice Meisner *Marxism, Maoism and Utopia: Eight Essays*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, p. 235.

8 Meisner, pp. 222–23.

9 Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,” in *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 143.

10 Michel de Certeau, “On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life.”

上海

by Shelly Kraicer

Allegory and ambiguity in Zhang Yimou's *Shanghai Triad*.

ZHANG YIMOU'S TOUR THROUGH FILM GENRES (HISTORICAL epic, action thriller, psychological thriller, costume drama, country tale, and epic melodrama) has now reached the gangster film. Mob-ruled Shanghai in the 1930's is the setting for the first half of *Shanghai Triad* [*Yao ya yao, yao dao waipo qiao*]. Zhang displays a swirl of luxury, violence (although muted), glamorous production numbers (featuring Gong Li), and claustrophobic menace. It's certainly stylish, but doesn't break new ground. What we have instead is a setup for the second half of the film: the main characters (gangster boss Tang (Li Baotian), his mistress Jinbao (Gong Li), who is a famous nightclub singer, and her new boy servant Shuisheng

(Wang Xiaoxiao)) retreat to a remote, peaceful island, where the consequences of the first part are played out. The film ends with a return to Shanghai.

Like all of Zhang Yimou's work, this film supports a wealth of possible meanings. As allegory, we have once again a vision of how innocent victims of an all-powerful patriarchal figure (embodied in the gang boss) attempt to survive under its shadow.

Using a slightly narrower focus, one can find a commentary on contemporary post-communist China. Some historians see a striking similarity between China's current embrace of gung-ho capitalism and its attendant corruption on the one hand,





and the free-wheeling commercialism and lawlessness of pre-revolutionary Shanghai on the other. So perhaps the film is a standard cautionary tale, depicting the perils of China's current condition. In this rather literal-minded reading, Boss Tang and his aging cronies could stand for the progressively more enfeebled Chinese leadership of today, brutally wielding power not out of any ideological fervour, but merely in the pursuit of personal power and wealth.¹

Shanghai Triad can also be seen as another showpiece for Gong Li: crafted this time to display her in a sophisticated, international setting. She wears glamorous clothing—she sings, she dances—she's a charismatic character who makes the journey from an extremely unsympathetic person to someone we end up caring for. It's a great, meaty role, but I'm not sure Gong Li pulls it off this time. She doesn't seem completely

to mesh with the character of Jinbao. I'm reminded of what is lacking in some of her Hong Kong film performances: there is a distance, a slightly uncomfortable fit, which never lets one forget that we're watching China's Most Celebrated Movie Star. And I'm afraid that I would have to agree with nightclub patron Fatty Yu, who observes of Jinbao's stage performance that "she looks better than she sings."

Unfortunately, the film's text (story, screenplay and characterization) doesn't feel substantial enough to support the burden of all its subtexts, of all the cultural work that it is trying to perform. *To Live* (1994) hinted at a new problem in Zhang's work: the allegorical "point" of that movie—that the intervention of the Chinese Communist Party into history meant only disaster for the Chinese—threatened to overwhelm the particularity of its story.

Zhang's earlier films *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Judou* (1989), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) all pack a tremendous emotional punch. Each of their stories is self-sufficient. The affective investment that each inspires animates the other registers of meaning (what Fredric Jameson calls "allegorical transcodings") that each generates. But this process does not work well in reverse. *Shanghai Triad* relies too heavily on the strength of its extra-textual references to support its otherwise thinly drawn story. In the future, when its connections to contemporary debate fade in importance, what remains may not be rich or provocative enough to continue to generate new allusions, new meanings.²

At least one further register of meaning is worth examining. A suggestive ambiguity deep in the structure of *Shanghai Triad* comes more sharply into focus in the context of Zhang Yimou's continuing exploration of the links between vision, knowledge, ideology and power. This film is about perception: both visual and aural. Its sound world signifies. Zhang and his sound editor Tao Jing have crafted an extraordinarily complex and beautiful soundtrack that is perhaps the film's most original accomplishment. Bells and then chimes form a constant background commentary to the action, in a way which is powerful but difficult to pin down.

Shanghai Triad's songs function formally to define the film's structure and mark its action. Jinbao's Western-influenced showtunes marking her assumed, constructed Queen of the Stage persona give way gradually to the children's song "Yao ya yao, yao dao waipo qiao" (Row, row to Grandmother's Bridge). This is the island girl Ajiao's song, the Chinese title of the film, the source of its "theme-song", and its final refrain, sung by a children's chorus.³ It marks for us Jinbao's own childhood, too, her already-lost innocence, and that possibility of innocence which Shuisheng is about to have taken from him.

Zhang seems to be positing a set of binary oppositions here, the second term of which he privileges: urban/rural, adulthood/childhood, corruption/innocence, Western/Chinese, false/true. There is a stable moral perspective. In this view, the film enacts a critique of "progress" which it pictures as a fall from innocence—an innocence which is then impossible to recover.

But a different kind of approach figures in *Shanghai Triad's* visual world. We are never allowed to forget that we perceive Shanghai, and then the island hideaway, through the eyes and mind of the fourteen year-old Shuisheng, a bewildered, frightened, disoriented "country bumpkin". This is formally expressed by the profusion of subjective steadicam sequences, and the seemingly obsessively repeated close-ups of Shuisheng's open innocent face. Points of view are constantly put into question: think of all the shots of scenes viewed through windows, distorted mirrors, holes in walls, half-shut doors, translucent screens. There is seemingly no privileged, "objective" point of view: everything is contingent, mediated, at least one remove.

What lies behind and dominates perception is power. In *Shanghai Triad's* world, it is Boss Tang who holds all the power, who ultimately determines how one sees and what one knows. The film is an initiation movie for Shuisheng, and a

de-initiation movie for Jinbao: his world view is elaborately constructed (while hers is de-constructed) in the seven days spanned by the movie. Power's enforcement mechanisms are transparent: Uncle Shi strikes Shuisheng and threatens to kill him when Shuisheng tries to leave. And the savage and boundless violence underpinning Boss Tang's control is made quite clear by the film's ending. So is the control that power has over knowledge. Shuisheng's perception of the world can be turned quite literally upside down by Boss Tang, which is driven home by the film's startling last scene.

Is Michel Foucault available in Chinese translation? Or is his insight—that all knowledge is ultimately ideological, determined by and in the service of power—all too obvious in a Chinese historical context? *Shanghai Triad* offers a concrete demonstration of how what we claim to know has a merely contingent existence. What is primary, that which constructs and enforces our particularly limited horizon of understanding, is power, with the threat of violence behind it. *Shanghai Triad* mirrors classic Foucauldian pessimism in all its inevitable bleakness.⁴

But this way of seeing the world is difficult to square with the one implied by the film's soundscape. Zhang Yimou gives us both, and the result is unsettling. The film is destabilized, closure is avoided by a stark dissonance between the two outlooks: the fixed, bipolar moral perspective of its sound world, and the decentered landscape of its visual world, where no privileged vantage point exists save that of power. In the final shot, the camera looks through Shuisheng's eyes as he swings upside-down over the water, while on the soundtrack a children's choir sings "Yao ya yao"—both perspectives, ironically juxtaposed, neither triumphing over the other.

1. For more interesting, nuanced explorations of the corrosive results of Dengism's "to get rich is glorious", see Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo* (1994), and Huang Jianxin's *Signal Left, Turn Right* [Da zuo deng xiang you zhuan] (1996), to name just a couple of recent examples.

2 This problem continues to dog the latest films from the mainland. Zhou Xiaowen's *The Emperor's Shadow* [Qin song] (1996) is a lavishly drawn, epically scaled history of the tyrannical Qin Emperor Ying Zheng, his dependence on his court musician Gao Jianli, and the latter's refusal to put his own art at the service of imperial power. It is no surprise that this very dilemma should preoccupy a film director still trying to work within the PRC film system. In this case, though, it exerts an almost palpable pressure on the film that manages to smother its vitality, despite brilliant performances by Jiang Wen and Ge You in the leading roles. Just the opposite is true for independent filmmaker Zhang Yuan's impressive *Sons* [Erzi] (1996), a precisely imagined and harrowingly intense family drama/documentary set in contemporary Beijing. In it, two indolent sons burdened by an alcoholic, abusive, and increasingly loony father finally free themselves from his domination: one son attacks him, and the resulting shock drives Dad meekly into a mental hospital. The father actually plays himself in the film, as does one of the sons, who also co-wrote the autobiographical screenplay. The apparently true origin of this plot lightens the film's burden of allegorical signification (though it's not all that hard to construct one, in retrospect). This leaves *Sons* free to draw its power from its convincingly drawn characters and moving situations.

3. The song would also be very familiar to a Chinese audience watching the film, as a lullaby familiar from childhood. Thus it would evoke a time of innocence and simplicity, fixed in nostalgic memory.

4. This is not the first time that Zhang Yimou has ventured into this territory, however. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, Gong Li's (as Song Lian) route to madness does not have to be read as tragedy. As Foucault argued in "Madness and Civilization", in a world where "reason" is completely colonized by power, "madness" can be a strategic refusal to submit to power's hegemony, the only possible gesture of defiance.

by Yanmei Wei

Music and Femininity in Zhang Yimou's Family Melodrama

AS THE "DRAMA WITH MUSIC," MELODRAMA HAS MAINTAINED an intimate and volatile relationship with music. While in the nineteenth century it represented and confirmed bourgeois values, melodrama "takes on new life in the twentieth century with the invention of film and with the development of the classical Hollywood film industry."¹ Although Hollywood melodramas are said to be conventional and formulaic, they may also have revolutionary potential. Thomas Elsaesser, for example, maintains that some melodramas can aspire to serious social and aesthetic achievements. Although many factors are involved in the making of a sophisticated melodrama, Elsaesser demonstrates that music is an integral part of the genre and a key mode of representation.

Elsaesser defines melodrama as "a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects."² As an essential part of melodrama, music has been used and interpreted variously in melodramatic movies. On the one hand, music in classical Hollywood melodrama performs atmospheric and psychological functions. It punctuates the mood of the actions, anchors the visual meaning of the film, and renders the individual an untroubled viewing subject. On the other hand, the unique features of musical representation also provide more radical and artistic means of signification. This paper attempts to explore the potential and the limit of film music's disruptive power by examining the role music plays in the construction of femininity in two of Zhang Yimou's family melodramas: *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *Red Sorghum* (1987).

In the case of Classical Hollywood Cinema, music traditionally plays an appeasing and harmonizing role reminiscent of that of the mother. Its purpose is not to provide rational or

analytic information but rather to affect the spectator in an immediate and direct, if unconscious fashion. This kind of music performs a maternal function resolving tension and transporting spectators to the make-believe cinematic world. Claudia Gorbman talks about how easy-listening music in the supermarket renders the consumer an untroublesome social subject.³ She suggests a parallel function for classical film music: it lulls the spectator into an untroublesome viewing position. Music in this category proceeds from and follows the image. Meanings are explicated by the image track. As a result, the sound track rarely speaks, only echoes.

According to Gorbman, traditional film music "interprets the image, pinpoints and channels the 'correct' meaning of the narrative events depicted" and prevents "the spectator's potential recognition of the technological basis of filmic articulation."⁴ The two most important roles of background music are described as "semiotic (as anchorage)" and "psychological (as suture or bonding)."⁵ Generally music works as "anchorage"

1. E. Ann Kaplan, "Melodrama/Subjectivity/Ideology: Western Melodrama Theories and Their Relevance to Recent Chinese Cinema", in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p.12.

2. In his influential essay Thomas Elsaesser praises the works of Douglas Kirk, Nicholas Ray, and Vincente Minnelli for being socially conscious and artistically innovative. They brought Hollywood melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s to an unprecedented level and were considered by him as "sophisticated family melodramas." See Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama", in *Film Genre Reader II*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp.350-380.

Op.cit. p.358.

3. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP; London: BFI Publishing House, 1987), p. 56.

4. IBID. p.58.

5. IBID. p.55.



Red Sorghum

to “anchor the image more firmly in meaning,”⁶ often at the cost of the complexity of the filmic representation. It also sutures or binds the audience into unmediated spectators. Because of its powerful emotional impact on the spectator, musical codes, especially nondiegetic music, have been exploited to elicit direct and full audience involvement in the story.

Its subservient role and “raw emotionalism” have caused film music to be stereotypically described as “feminine.” Many feminists object to the feminine metaphor for its implication that music, like woman, has to rely upon the word of others for articulation in classical films. They choose instead to explore music’s potential to open an avenue for expressing women’s desires. Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and many other feminists have argued that “music’s relatively abstract qualities permit a greater play of signification, a greater flexibility of meaning” and that “the practice of music can unsettle patriarchal symbolic structures and modes of subject formation.”⁷ In this sense, film music will not only anchor and reinforce the visual meaning of the film, but also offer commentary and critique of its own. The “feminine” music can be turned into “feminist” music that will encourage a radical mode of subject formation for the female audience.

In her study of mainland Chinese cinema, Stephanie Hoare observes that “the more conventional Chinese mainstream film closely resembles Western melodrama, while the innovative filmmakers employ Western art cinema methods.”⁸ This is not so obvious in Zhang’s works, however. Zhang Yimou has made it very clear that he does not want to alienate his audience. He started his career in the alternative cinema. In 1983 he served as cinematographer for an art film which is said to have sold only one copy in that year’s national new film fair. When he began to direct his own films, he boldly adopted a time-honored genre and successfully wrapped the most progressive message with the most excessive forms of melodrama. As an artist eager to win domestic and international recognition, Zhang Yimou will naturally work in the genre that has the widest appeal.

According to Ma Ning, family melodrama has been one of the dominant forms of expression in Chinese cinema since its origin at the beginning of this century.⁹ Its popularity can be partially explained by the position of the family in Chinese society. As the most basic social unit in traditional and contemporary China, family is always at the front of cultural struggle and transformation. Films centered around the family not only ensure audience involvement; they also enable the director to tackle social problems at the root.

A master of Chinese family melodrama, Zhang Yimou has taken advantage of music’s unique mode of signification and produced films that are both entertaining and subversive. Gorbman points out that music’s “freedom from linguistic signification and from representation of any kind preserves it as a more desirable, or less unpleasurable discourse” when used in classical Hollywood movies.¹⁰ In my opinion, music’s seductive pleasure, if deftly explored, can also contribute to a less didactic and more sophisticated type of social critique. In his films, Zhang Yimou occasionally has characters shout slogans of

social criticism. At the beginning of *Raise the Red Lantern* for example, Songlian remarks bitterly, both to her stepmother offscreen and the spectator in the theater: “Isn’t this [marriage against one’s will] women’s fate?!” Likewise, in *Shanghai Triad*, not too far into the story, before we get to know the master or the mistress, we already hear the gang leader’s semiliterate assistant reflect loudly on women’s status at a fancy nightclub. Moments like these always strike me as being somewhat abrupt and out of place. Neither the scene nor the characters are sufficiently prepared for these remarks, however incisive they are. These moments are fortunately rare in Zhang Yimou’s cinema. His most effective indictment against patriarchy is not delivered mainly with words, but rather through meticulously designed setting, lighting, action, and music. As an auteur, Zhang Yimou is very selective, stylized, and in strict control of the material. Yet he manages to integrate all the available means of representation so that his films will inspire without dictating, and preach without appearing boring.

Raise the Red Lantern begins with a raucous piece played by traditional percussion instruments of drum and gong. Anyone familiar with Chinese opera will be able to recognize it as the opening sequence of military plays. Traditional Chinese opera is always introduced with a piece of music which, in addition to catching the audience’s attention and stopping their noisy chatter, also indicates the type of play that is to be staged. The theatergoer, already acquainted with the conventions of each category, will know what to expect. The military tune that opens *Raise the Red Lantern* foreshadows a story of great intensity and possible loss of life. Aside from whetting the spectator’s appetite for a good tale, this opening piece also plays a part in the insistent use of theater symbolism by the director.

The importance of the Chinese theater in the film can be seen by the numerous audio-visual references to it. Like a traditional opera, the story of the film unfolds with the change of season and fortune. Set in a labyrinth of old houses, the overall feel of the film is enclosed and exclusive, neither affecting or affected by the outside world. The main characters rarely move beyond the courtyard. People who come from the outside seldom stay. The flow of the film is often interrupted by still shots of the house and the characters. Although we can infer from the clothing that the story takes place some time during the first half of the twentieth century, historical details are minimized to such an extent that they are almost inconsequential. Although they all have some basis in reality, objects, actions, and sounds tend to be ritualized in the big estate

6. *IBID.* p.32.

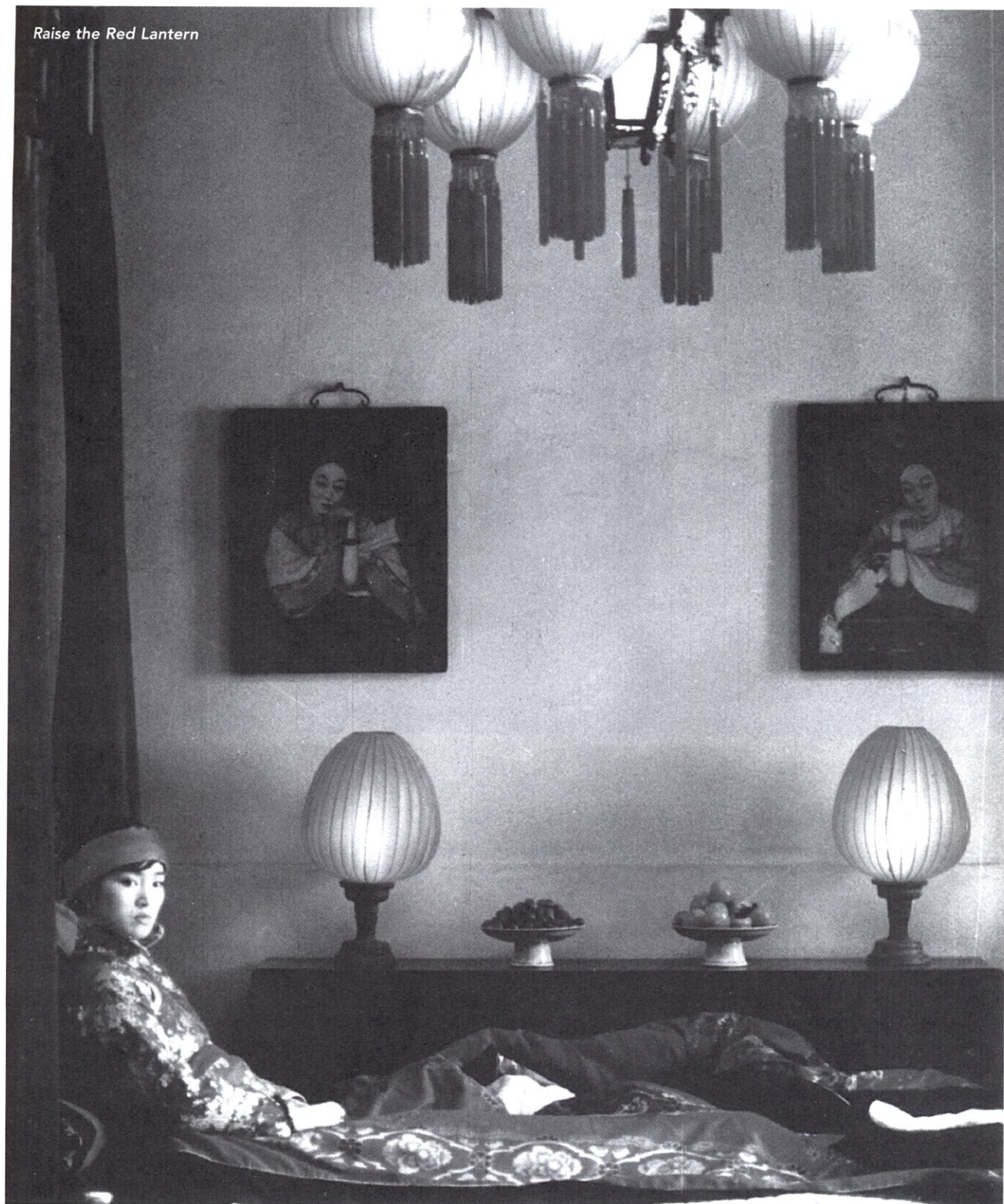
7. Carol Finn gives a summary of feminist writings on music in her essay “The ‘Problem’ of Femininity in Theories of Film Music”, in *Screen*, Vol.27 (1986), p.56-72. For many feminists, the significance of the music lies in its connection to the maternal and the libidinal and its capacity to signify without relying upon standard, patriarchal conventions.

8. Stephanie Alison Hoare, “Melodrama and Innovation: Literary Adaptation in Contemporary Chinese Film,” *DAI* 50-09 (1989): 2901A (Cornell University), p.4.

9. See Ma Ning, “Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese Family Melodrama of the Early 80s”, in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp.29-58.

10. Claudia Gorbman, *Op.cit.* p.63.

Raise the Red Lantern





which is itself set up as a main stage for family melodrama.

Many critics have reflected upon Zhang Yimou's ritualistic treatment of his material in *Raise the Red Lantern*. Rey Chow considers it a new and complicated kind of orientalism because it is "an exhibitionist self-display that contains, in its most excessive modes, a critique of the voyeurism of the orientalism itself."¹¹ Although I am not entirely convinced that the film is indeed a heroic parody of western orientalism, I do agree that Zhang's theatrical display of cultural detail achieves more than simply satisfying first world audiences' appetite for the primitive and the exotic. As this analysis will suggest, the use of rituals and references to the traditional opera establish the theater as the central metaphor in the film. Zhang Yimou pays scant attention to the historical specificity of the story while consistently ritualizing cultural details. In a sense, his film is similar to the traditional Chinese theater with its minimalist stagecraft and expressive treatment of theatrical elements. His film, like traditional Chinese theater, is anti-illusionistic but does not exclude audience identification. The director constructs the reality of the Chen family only to show how it is a mirage, painstakingly created and preserved by traditional ideology and individual aspirations.

The significance of the theater can be understood on multiple levels. It can be seen as an apt description of the hypocritical Chen family. The deception and pretension which characterize the family relationship invite the audience to interpret it in terms of the theater. The Chen house is a permanent stage where the curtain never falls and everyone is forced to put on a constant show. It is unreal in the sense that one is never allowed to be sincere and honest. The wives and maids have to play-act in order to survive. Even the master, the absolute ruler of the house, lives a life dictated by tradition and customs. Reduced to a mouthpiece of the patriarchal order, he appears as a mere shadow and never shows his face in the film.

Such a world of falsity and hypocrisy is suffocating. Interestingly, some will turn to the real theater for a relief from the inhuman life-theater. In the movie, the opera serves as a means of wish-fulfillment for Meishan, the third wife. A famous actress before she married the master, Meishan sings a few arias in the movie, all on the subject of love. It is ironic, since love is exactly what is absent in the house. There is no love between husband and wife, or mother and child. Human relationships are determined by their value for self-promotion



and power-struggle. The theater, therefore, becomes a way of escape for Meishan. She confesses that she sings just to deceive herself. Upon the loveless world she is in, she builds up a utopian world of love and happiness. It is understandable that Meishan insists she is the sincerest when she throws on her actress's robe and delivers the arias, since in real life she has to lie and cheat in order to survive.

The world in the theater is comforting, but also deceptive. As wish-fulfillment, the theater does not really allow Meishan to be herself. Her success is only imaginary and her happiness temporary. It deludes her (or she deludes herself?) into believing that she can transcend her adverse circumstances. Her tragedy proves that, like the theater, life has to be played according to rules, the violation of which will bring self-destruction. Meishan may be a good and enthusiastic actress, but she does not have the free will to compose or alter the script. When Shakespeare remarks that the whole world is a stage and all of us are merely players, he is conveying the tyranny of time. Zhang Yimou compares life to a stage because both deprive the individual of the freedom to control the action. Meishan, discontent with a man many years her senior, has an affair with the handsome family doctor. Her

search for love in real life costs her her own life, as the affair is later discovered and she is hanged. As I will show later, Songlian, the heroine, is also ruined by her attempt to convert dream into reality.

Like the theater, the Chen household offers various kinds of rewards for those who play their assigned roles well. Whoever is favored by the master receives foot massage, choice of meal, and other sexual and financial privileges. Seduced by the power it promises, Songlian and Meishan underestimate the demand of an alliance with patriarchy. For a moment they forget that they do not have the freedom to choose their roles. Although the women are encouraged to sabotage and cheat each other, they are not allowed to challenge the authority of the master. They can only succeed with his support and within the boundary of "ancestral rules." They cannot exchange roles with the master. No act of free will is deemed permissible and only brings severe punishment upon the transgressor of the rules.

In her review of *Raise the Red Lantern*, Silverthorne comments how Songlian is both "clear-sighted and deluded, aware

11. Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), p.171.



of the situation she finds herself in yet teased by the mirage of access to phallic power."¹² On the soundtrack, Songlian's repressed desires are signified by the flute music, while the non-diegetic female choir sings out her growing awareness of her situation.

The Chinese flute is a "bamboo tube bound with waxed silk and pierced with eight holes, one to blow through, one covered with a thin reedy membrane, and six to be played upon by the fingers."¹³ The flute is the emblem of Han Xiangzi, one of the eight immortals of Taoism, who possesses the power to bring instant growth and blossom to flowers. In the Chinese popular imagination, the flute is associated with romance and love. A famous story relates how the princess Nongyu falls in love with Xiaoshi, a talented flute player and is united with him eventually. In some other legends, the flute becomes the

symbol of Lan Caihe, a female Taoist immortal who chants a poem to warn people of this fleeting life and its transitory pleasures. In this aspect, the flute is a melancholy instrument whose soft, haunting tune is said to be able to capture the sorrow of handsome youths and slender beauties. The flute can also be seen as a phallic symbol and the act of performing upon it as the displacement of one's erotic desire. All these are useful for our understanding of the flute music in *Raise the Red Lantern*.

In her life, Songlian is close to only two men: her father and the master's son. In both cases, she is forced to part with the man. Her father commits suicide after bankruptcy and leaves her his flute. Songlian owns the instrument, but does not know how to play it. She can only fondle it, caress it, and dream. Later the flute is taken away from her and destroyed by

the master, who suspects that it was given to her by a secret lover.

Songlian meets Feipu, the young master, when she is attracted by the flute music to the house tower and finds Feipu there. She stands behind Feipu and watches him play. Her voyeuristic gaze travels from Feipu's youthful body to the beautiful instrument, feasting upon the sight of an ideal love object. The two come to like each other during their first meeting. Feipu asks whether Songlian plays flute or not. She is about to answer when his mother, the first wife, calls from below: "Feipu, Feipu, come downstairs!" As a filial son, the young master obeys and leaves the tower. It is very tempting to imagine what would happen if Songlian did have the chance to answer him. We already know at this point that she does not play the flute. Yet she has one. It is from her late father to whom she is very much attached. If given the opportunity, she might want to tell Feipu about it. The young master would probably offer to teach her how to play. In either case, the answer to the question would initiate a communication between the two and could lead to a loving relationship. Yet their conversation is interrupted.

It is significant that they do not have a chance to start to develop their relationship. In the film, Feipu is never posed as a real potential lover for Songlian, but rather a projection of her own stifled desires. Soft-spoken, gentle, and obedient, Feipu is subject to the tyranny of his parents and is unlikely to be the protector of Songlian. It is difficult to know exactly how Feipu feels about Songlian, for we only see Songlian initiate the look and fall in love. As for Feipu, he is always away, distant and unavailable. When they meet for the second time, it happens to be Songlian's birthday. He presents her with a gift, which, as Songlian correctly recognizes, is a love token a man gets from a woman, possibly from a prostitute. It seems fair to suspect that Feipu is involved with other women and does not take Songlian seriously. Even if he does, being passive and effeminate, he will not be able to stand up to his father and the "ancestral rules" he represents. At that moment Songlian realizes that Feipu is just a fantasy she has created for herself. Her faint hope of love, like her faint hope of being in charge of her fate, is crushed.

The affair between Songlian and Feipu would be disruptive because it is illicit, "incestual," and adulterous. As the concubine of the father, Songlian is a nominal mother for Feipu. The oedipal relationship, if materialized, would be a real challenge to the authority of the master. Songlian is allured by the prospect of taking control of her emotional life, not realizing that the doom of the old master will only result in the succession of a new one and the continuation of the existing order. There might be a transfer of power in the house, but it will only be between father and son, from one patriarch to another. In the Chen family, to survive means to totally distort one's subjectivity, not the empowerment of it. It is not surprising that Songlian will not be able to learn to play the flute and will eventually lose it. The instrument symbolizes all that is promised and then cruelly denied to Songlian once she shows signs of autonomy and defiance. When Songlian finds out that Feipu gives her something he has received from

another woman, she is furious. Feipu turns around to leave when Songlian calls softly "Feipu!" Feipu turns back, looking at her. They see each other, recognize each other, but cannot go any further. At this moment the same piece of flute music is played on the soundtrack, evoking memories of their first sweet meeting and expressing the disillusion with her constructed image of love and romance.

The breakup with Feipu is only another poignant moment in a long process of awakening for Songlian. If the flute music captures the subtlety of Songlian's love affair, the female chorus vocalizes the sorrows of a woman who is deprived of agency and lives in isolation.

In the film, the chorus is reserved for the female characters and sung by female voices. Unlike the opera and flute music, it is purely non-diegetic, playing no part in advancing the plot. Zhang Yimou's involvement with the movie can be seen from his extensive use of the non-diegetic female chorus which intervenes at every critical moment and mediates between the narrative and the spectator. By employing the chorus as his speaker, Zhang abandons the privileged position of a detached observer and assumes that of a deeply involved commentator. It is significant that the chorus always sings at the moment of recognition on the part of the heroine. As Songlian becomes more and more aware of the pathetic situation she is confined to, the energetic and enlightened college student is gradually turned into the desolate and confused fourth wife. The wordless tune is appropriate, since every recognition is simultaneously loss and gain. She acquires self knowledge and knowledge of her surroundings at the cost of hope and innocence. This painful transformation will only be trivialized if expressed in words. Music, on the other hand, is able to illuminate the heroine's complicated position: silenced (as can be demonstrated by the wordlessness of the tune) yet not stifled, still looking for ways to break free.

The chorus music in the film ranges from melancholic to indignant and rapidly varies in tempo. We first hear it at Songlian's wedding night. The bed is covered by a net so we cannot see or hear the couple clearly. As the close-up of the bed is gradually replaced by a shot of the whole room, the choir sings a wordless epithalamium. The sorrow in the voice of the choir reflects Songlian's mixed feelings about marriage and renders the jubilant appearance of the wedding room ridiculous: the red lantern, her colorful dress, and the freshly placed decoration.

Laura Mulvey has pointed out that in traditional narrative film, woman is turned into image while man is the "bearer of the look."¹⁴ Spectators are therefore sutured into the "voyeuristic-scopophilic"¹⁵ look identified as the male gaze. As an alternative to the classical cinema, feminist movies should assume the task of creating a female spectatorship capable of an active and positive identification with the on-screen image of woman.

12. Jeanne Silverthorne, "The Haunted Woman", in *Artforum*, (March 1992), p.87.

13. See the entry on flute in C.A.S. Williams' *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1974), p.193.

14. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989), p.19.

15. *IBID.* p.25.

By deliberately avoiding the lovemaking and even shots of the body, *Raise the Red Lantern* denies the viewer voyeuristic pleasure. The few close-ups of Songlian are still shots of a frozen, expressionless face which is almost embarrassing to look at. This makes it difficult for the viewer to identify with a male gaze. Meanwhile, the melancholy, wordless tune sung by the chorus instructs the viewer, now deprived of the pleasure of looking, to identify with the female character.

In the ensuing scene, when the master goes to the third wife's room, Songlian is left alone on her wedding night. She puts on her clothes, gets out of bed, and looks into the mirror on the desk. The choir is heard again and as it becomes louder and sadder, Songlian cries. The spectator, fully aware of the situation, cannot help sympathizing with her for her misery. By using a chorus composed of female voice only and reserving its use to the feeling of the female character, the director intends to address viewers in such a way that they will empathize with the suffering heroine. The well-trained voices also symbolize culture and civilization that are consonant with the educational background of Songlian.

This is not the first time Zhang Yimou has employed a chorus in his movies. *Red Sorghum*, his first film, contains quite a few choruses composed of amateur, male voices. Before

working on *Red Sorghum*, Zhang Yimou's composer had composed for Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), another internationally renowned Chinese movie. Zhang Yimou and the composer once discussed why the music in *Yellow Earth* was not powerful enough: "we concluded that 1) it is unnatural to have a professional singer sing the song of a country girl 2) it is also unnatural to accompany the song of a country girl with a symphony orchestra."¹⁶ In order not to repeat the mistake, the director wanted the actors to yell out the songs: "all the songs were performed by the actors themselves. I didn't like them to imitate professional singers. I told them that if they lost their voice from singing out, we would take a break for a few days and shoot only scenes that do not require speech."¹⁷ Zhang Yimou is not looking for perfection in his music; he lays more emphasis on spontaneity and naturalness. What is rough and amateur in the voice can be compensated for by the exuberant spirit it radiates. Hearing them, one cannot help being impressed by the group of men who never lose their faith in the joy and fulfillment life could bring. Their performance may lack in training, but never vitality.

Zhang Yimou's preference for the natural voice demonstrates a rejection of all that is artificial and a desire to return to the coarse yet carefree mythological past. It is important that the



Red Sorghum

chorus performance is closely associated with wine-making and the drunken state in the film. As Wang Yuejin points out, *Red Sorghum* defines wine-drinking as "an externalization of masculinity," and intoxication as "a way of challenging authority."¹⁸ Zhang's chorus reminds me of that in Greek theater, which is held in great esteem in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Not coincidentally, this is a book that has influenced Zhang Yimou. As Mo Yan, the author of the *Red Sorghum* family saga recalls, "a while ago Zhang Yimou wrote to us editors, saying that he was reading Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. He said he really admired Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit."¹⁹

For Nietzsche, chorus embodies the very spirit of the ideal tragedy: the combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysian—two different yet interacting elements in art. The "Apollonian" spirit is marked by measure and moderation, while the "Dionysian" spirit, signified by music, is that of intoxication and excess. The Apollonian is identified with the dream state which is a model for "life" and will later be proved as mere appearance. Nietzsche rejects any form of action since temporal action exerts no impact on a world which is permanently "out of joint." To believe that action is useful we need illusions—and this illusion about value in the world allow the characters on stage to act. Even though life is futile and happiness is temporary, people need a means to justify their existence, however false the world may prove to be. The Dionysian reality is therefore different and separated from everyday reality. It seems that Nietzsche's chorus is a constructed shield which defends the ideal and freedom created in art against the invasion of the material reality.²⁰

The high-spirited men who yell "drink our wine, one dares to walk through the Black Death Ridge; drink our wine, one does not kowtow even at the sight of the emperor" are indeed a celebration of the Dionysian spirit. They embody the desire to vindicate one's existence and to overcome social restraints on the individual. The chorus exhibits a confidence and carnivalesque joy not often seen in Zhang's later movies. Significantly for me, this chorus is a male chorus which forms a drastic contrast with that of the female in *Raise the Red Lantern*.

The vigorous song in *Red Sorghum* conveys a sense of strength and hope; the female voice in *Raise the Red Lantern* is well-rehearsed and refined, but lacks the carrying power. Used diegetically, the wine song represents male virility and independence whose expression does not need to rely on external, non-diegetic devices. Unlike the Greek chorus, which exists outside of the narrative and jumps into and out of the dramatic action from time to time, Zhang Yimou's male chorus is diegetic. Instead of breaking the spell of the story on the audience and serving as intermediary between the two, his chorus participates in the narrative and performs a spontaneous response to the story. It seems that the Dionysian chorus in *Red Sorghum* is inseparable from the everyday reality, although it can be argued that the material reality in the film is not a realistic, but rather a constructed world.

A few oppositions seem to be established by the two movies: masculinity and femininity; the primitive and the cultured; joy and sorrow; and ultimately, life and death. Masculinity is aligned with strength and hope, while feminini-

ty is associated with oppression and sorrow. It is simplistic to quickly accuse Zhang Yimou of reproducing the patriarchal order that he vows to subvert. In *Red Sorghum* masculinity is depicted as being natural, innocent, and productive. It is represented by the uncultivated men in the winery who are determined to live a life of their own. Men with power, wealth, or privilege however, are portrayed as weak, impotent, and pitiful. They are male, yet not masculine. In this sense, masculinity is not confined to the realm of the male, but rather symbolic of the national spirit that is held by Zhang as a remedy for a culture whose original energy has been weakened and confined by man-made fetters in the process of civilization.

Yet Zhang Yimou's metaphorical representation of femininity and masculinity also renders his "sympathetic" treatment of women problematic, especially when compared with the representation of the male in *Red Sorghum*. While *Red Sorghum* impresses the viewer as spontaneous and natural, the power of *Raise the Red Lantern* appears somewhat strained in comparison. It is disturbing to see the dichotomy between virility and powerlessness being embodied by the gendered choruses in the two movies. The professional female chorus is filled with so much sorrow and grief that it turns palid when heard together with the sonorous utterances of the male. The males sing songs while the females hum wordless tunes. The men are able to express themselves through speech while the women can only protest in silence. In Zhang Yimou's films, woman stands for all those who are victimized and silenced by the artificial "civilization." Because of this, *Judou*, Zhang's second movie (his first addressing women's issues), almost totally abandons the festive atmosphere of *Red Sorghum*. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, his third movie, the heroines' resistance is courageous and desperate, yet it does not suggest any practical way out. The film begins with a raucous opera piece and ends with the melancholy and quickly speeding voices of the chorus, which suggests the derangement of Songlian. She paces aimlessly in the courtyard on the wedding night of the master and his fifth wife. As the camera pulls back, we are given a full view of the house and Songlian. Not coincidentally, this is a visualization of the Chinese character "prisoner."

From *Red Sorghum* to *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou shifts his focus from the "masculine" to the "feminine," which also changes the tone of his movies from joyous and optimistic to burdened and helpless. Although it can be argued that the protocols of femininity and masculinity are used symbolically as political commentaries, it is still disturbing how the movies manage to perpetuate gender stereotypes.

16. See Luo Xueyin, "Zhang Yimou Tan Honggaoliang Chuangzuo Tihui" [Interview with Zhang Yimou about the *Red Sorghum*], in *Lun Zhang Yimou* [On Zhang Yimou], (Beijing: China Film Publishing House, 1994), p.177.

17. IBID.

18. Wang Yuejin, "Mixing Memory and Desire: *Red Sorghum* A Chinese Version of Masculinity and Femininity", in *Public Culture*, Vol.12, no.3 (1989), p.39.

19. Mo Yan, "Yejiào Honggaoliang Jiazu Beiwanglu" [Memorandum to The Red Sorghum Family Saga], in *Lun Zhang Yimou* [On Zhang Yimou], (Beijing: Beijing Film Publishing House, 1994), p.194.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufman, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

CENTRE STAGE: Reconstructing the Bio-Pic

by Julian Stringer

AS HONG KONG PREPARES TO BECOME A SPECIAL Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, the city's filmmakers struggle to define and preserve its cultural identity. In the run-up to 1997, this historical project has tended to focus around two areas of concern, namely the search to establish forms of localized subjectivity and the desire to explore issues of space and mobility. Ackbar Abbas, who has written one of the best general accounts of contemporary Hong Kong cinema,¹ claims that such concerns are "exemplified most outstandingly" (68) in Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1987) and *Centre Stage* (a.k.a. *Ruan Lingyu*, or *Actress*, 1991). As well as offering unique conceptualizations of space and subjectivity, these two titles have done much to secure Kwan's reputation as one of the true *auteurs* of Hong Kong cinema.

Both *Rouge*, which has already been the subject of an impressive amount of English-language criticism,² and *Centre Stage* present their meditations on such themes dialectically, through the utilization of a multiple diegesis, or what Abbas calls a "double temporal framework" (75). *Rouge*, a ghost melodrama, moves back and forth between an opulently recreated 1930s Hong Kong and a deliberately dank and lifeless 1980s, while the latter film utilizes multiple diegeses as it oscillates between 1990s Hong Kong and 1930s Shanghai. In each case, narrative complexities establish links between Hong Kong's past, present, and future.

Centre Stage is ostensibly a bio-pic about the great Chinese film star Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935). However, it is formally and thematically so complex a Brechtian example of meta-cinema that it constitutes a radical reworking of both genre and subject matter. The film mixes beautifully shot period reconstructions of Ruan's life and work with contemporary interviews with the Hong Kong stars who act out the reconstructions. In turn, these diegetic layers are then edited together with actual footage of Ruan's surviving films and present-day interviews with her colleagues from the Shanghai film industry. The result, as in a cubist montage or Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), is a kaleidoscopic narrative articulation. No single piece of information is presented from any one point of view, although the various accounts all come together to form a completely sympathetic testimonial.

Resisting the temptation to recount incidents from Ruan's entire life, *Centre Stage* focuses on her public and private affairs in the years immediately leading up to her premature death.

With the black-and-white footage of the Hong Kong production crew acting as a framing device, we see this lady from Shanghai negotiate various emotional and professional demands. Ruan Lingyu/Maggie Cheung rehearses and films with a number of directors, giving famous performances for Sun Yu (*Wild Flower*, 1930), Wu Yonggang (*The Goddess*, 1934), and Cai Chusheng (*New Woman*, 1934). However, just as the Japanese invasion of China disrupts her work at Lianhua Studios, Ruan experiences behind-the-scenes problems with her estranged husband, Tang Shi-chan/Lawrence Ng. And after the Shanghai press gets its teeth into her adulterous affair with Chang Ta-min/Ch'in Han, she becomes distanced from him as well. Subject to numerous torments and public humiliations, Ruan Lingyu commits suicide in 1935, proclaiming, in the note left lying by her side, that "gossip is a fearful thing".

According to *Centre Stage*, the tragedy of Ruan's life resonates on a number of different levels. In this article, I would like to suggest how the film's fundamental reconstruction of the bio-pic is perfectly in keeping with the search to establish localized forms of Hong Kong space and subjectivity. The utilization of multiple diegeses necessitates a reading of the connections between Hong Kong's colonial past and its "post-colonial" future. This is a strategy which is familiar from some of Kwan's earlier work.

To give one example, Ackbar Abbas points out that when Fleur/Anita Mui, the ghostly 1930s courtesan from *Rouge*, sets out to find her old flame in the historical present, her pale demeanor prompts one character to describe her as "unchanged for fifty years", thus ironically referring to the terms of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong, which decrees that after 1997 the settlement shall remain unchanged for half a century under China's

1. Ackbar Abbas, "The New Hong Kong Cinema and the *Déjà Disparu*", *Discourse*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Spring 1994), pp. 65-77. (All other references to this article are included in parentheses).

2. See Rey Chow, "A Souvenir of Love", *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 7 (1993), pp. 59-76; Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Two Films From Hong Kong: Parody and Allegory", in Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau (eds.), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 202-215; David L. Eng, "Love at Last Site: Waiting for Oedipus in Stanley Kwan's *Rouge*", *Camera Obscura* 32 (September-January 1993-94), pp. 75-101. Also Tony Rayns, "Rouge" and "Love Unto Waste" (on Stanley Kwan), *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 57, no. 673 (February 1990), pp. 31-33.



Maggie Cheung as Ruan
Lingyu in *Centre Stage*



reconstructed policy of “one country, two systems” (75). In a similar fashion, *Centre Stage* opens with a short interview scene between Stanley Kwan and the actress who impersonates Ruan Lingyu, Maggie Cheung, wherein Kwan asks Cheung whether she would “like to be remembered fifty years from now”. While the question introduces themes of stardom and idolatry that will be returned to time and again, it also makes the political point by reinforcing a sense of historical perspective and urgency. As in countless other movies made since the post-1979 Hong Kong ‘New Wave’, those directed by Stanley Kwan collapse text and subtext into one.

My reading of how *Centre Stage* breaks the generic constraints of the bio-pic is premised upon a rudimentary analysis of its high style. In virtually every scene, Kwan’s aesthetic impulse favors opulent production design over humdrum realism, which can be seen as one strategy for preserving the memory of Hong Kong: as the city disappears from view, its cinematic afterimage shines through the dark. *Centre Stage* is the fifth of Stanley Kwan’s six feature films to date, and in line

with most of his other work it embodies a distinctly melodramatic imagination (it is telling that he is most often compared to another gay director of “women’s pictures”, George Cukor). However, unlike three of his earlier titles—the generally neglected *Women* (1985), *Love Unto Waste* (1986), and *Full Moon in New York* (1990)—*Centre Stage* has succeeded in restoring high style to the prominent position it used to occupy on the international film festival circuit.

The film has ridden the crest of two waves, benefiting both from a widespread foreign interest in *Rouge*, and from the recent global fascination with contemporary Chinese cinema. After its initial success at the 1992 Hong Kong Film Awards, the film travelled to many overseas exhibition sites. In Berlin (where it was projected in the 167 minute version that is the subject of this article, rather than the two hour cut unspooled for domestic release), Maggie Cheung picked up a Silver Bear for her work on the film, the first such prize ever awarded to a Chinese actress. Undoubtedly, this recognition generated interest in Kwan’s next film, *Red Rose White Rose* (1995), and



enabled him to receive further commissions—*Yang Yin*, a personal account of gender in pan-Chinese cinema, was financed by the British Film Institute and premiered a few months ago. Now, amid growing incomprehension over why Kwan's films are not in North American circulation,³ *Centre Stage* and *Rouge* are available in a package of nine contemporary Hong Kong movies distributed by the Minneapolis-based non-profit organization, Asian Media Access.

THE BIO-PIC: GENERIC MODEL

By a pleasant historical accident, *Center Stage* was making the rounds of the international film festival circuit at the very moment the bio-pic itself was receiving sustained critical attention via the publication of George F. Custen's invaluable book on the subject.⁴ Custen's work provides the definitive analysis of how Hollywood constructs public history, and while it sidesteps other national cinemas and refuses to imag-

ine what a radical deconstruction of the genre might look like, *Center Stage* provides its audio-visual afterword.⁵

In order to appreciate how *Center Stage* reconstructs the bio-pic as a means of raising questions about space and subjectivity in contemporary Hong Kong, it is clearly necessary to indicate what the broad rules of its generic model are. Here, then, is an extremely brief summary of some of the main points of Custen's book as they relate to Kwan's film.

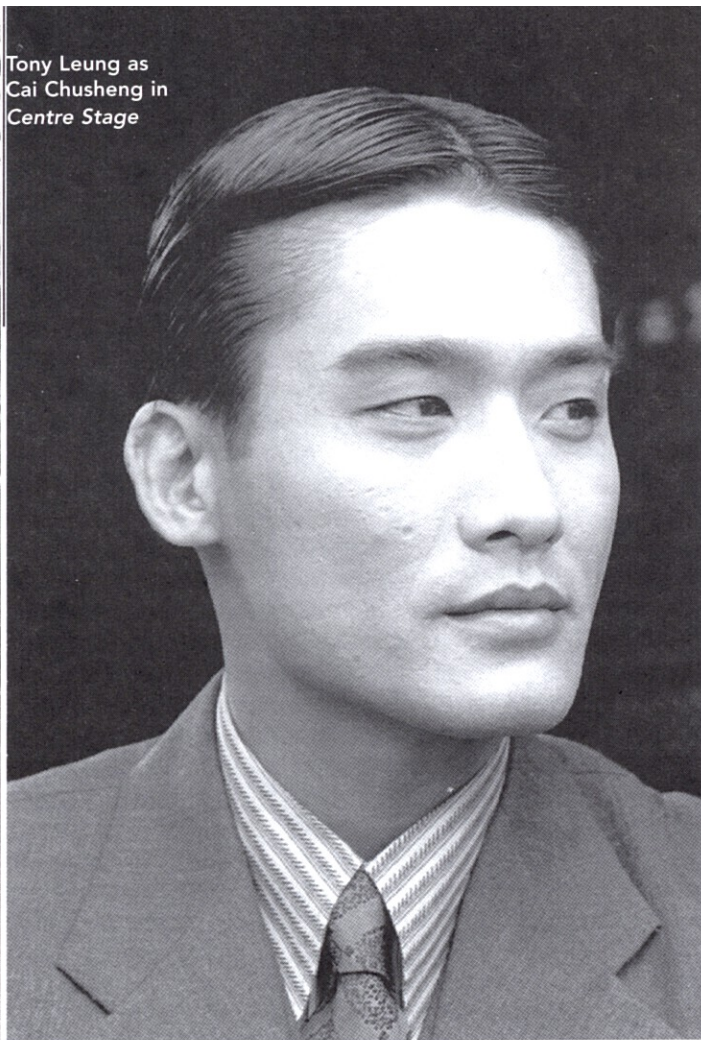
Firstly, conventional bio-pics need to be understandable to audiences in thematic, narrative and formal terms. There is

3. See Michael Atkinson, "Songs of Crushed Love: The Cinema of Stanley Kwan", *Film Comment*, vol. 32, no. 3 (May/June 1996), pp. 42-49.

4. George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1992). (All other references to this book are included in parenthesis).

5. *Center Stage* shares this distinction with Todd Haynes' suppressed *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987)—a mini-feature which turns the genre on its head by including the best-ever performance by a Barbie doll in a major motion picture—and Derek Jarman's postmodern biographies of such figures as *Caravaggio* (1986), *Edward II* (1991), and *Wittgenstein* (1992).

Tony Leung as
Cai Chusheng in
Centre Stage



Anita Mui as Fleur
in *Rouge*



often, for example, a “double level of the articulation of fame” (34) wherein the intertextuality of star images is manipulated so as to anchor an existing set of signifiers around the image of the historical figure being impersonated —“in this light, perhaps one admires Queen Elizabeth I for her statecraft but also because she is Bette Davis” (34). More than that, star actors are likely to offer performative readings of only a limited number of social types drawn from a very small occupational pool, with politicians, sports heroes, and entertainers being the most favored. To play up the ordinary /extraordinary dichotomy that underpins the whole star phenomenon, this assortment of the great and the good is then “normalized” through the visualization of family and heterosexual love relationships. By such means, distinguished public careers led by distinct individuals can be safely inserted within dominant ideological norms and life stories narrated in conventional linear fashion.

Custen also suggests that the genre has a certain modular quality, in that the historical subjects blessed with the big screen treatment very often act the part of allegorical substitutes for Hollywood production personnel. When the lives of artists and entertainers are re-enacted—*The Glenn Miller Story* (Anthony Mann, 1954), say, or *Sweet Dreams* (1985), Karel Reisz’s excellent film about Patsy Cline—they function as self-reflexive celebrations of the movie industry itself. Affirming the very values of entertainment and show-biz that produced them, such films embody the life experiences of studio heads. At least in the classical Hollywood period, narratives revolve around self-made individuals who re-invent themselves as public show people through a combination of hard work, talent, and luck. To emphasize this struggle and self-affirmation, biopics often feature trial scenes that set the extraordinary individual off from his or her peers. In staging such public vindications, narratives can insert morality lessons in at appropriate moments.

Finally, bio-pics are formally set up in generally conservative ways, with opening title cards that establish the terms on which the depicted public life will be understood, and an initial promise that what the viewer is about to see and hear is “authentic”, or “the truth”. Yet narrative information in the genre is usually framed and presented from fixed and hierarchical points of view; we always already know how these stories about famous people are going to turn out. In most cases, all of this adds up to a bio-pic that will conform to a conservative realist aesthetic, that does not make dialectical connections between different historical times, and that refuses to interrogate the very process of constructing public history it contributes to.

REVISION OF GENERIC MODEL

On these terms, *Centre Stage* is clearly a revisionist bio-pic. Yet while critics have been quick to note its Brechtian distancing techniques, most have been slow to account for how these actually work on both textual and contextual levels. The film does not so much establish an alternative generic type as

Maggie Cheung as Ruan Lingyu
in *Centre Stage*

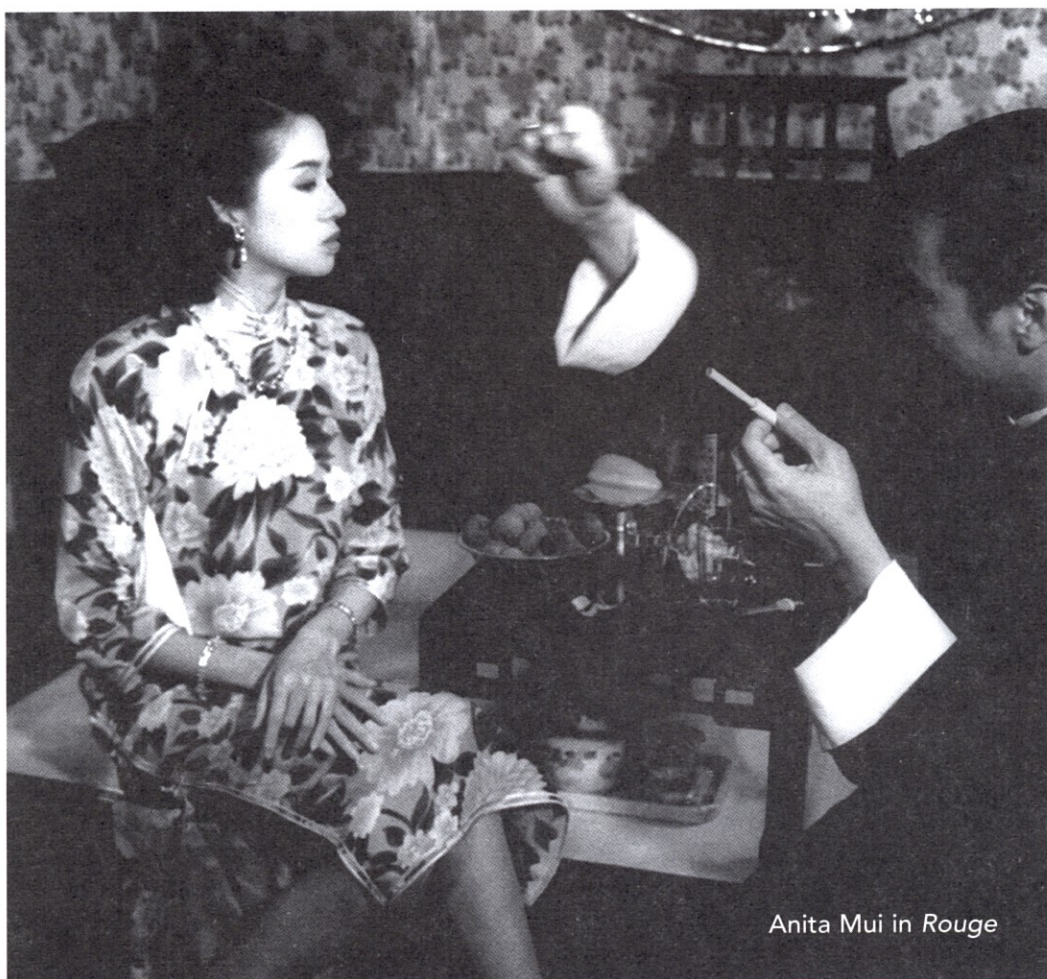


subvert its forms from within. One could say that any narrative about a famous actress is going to be generically normative in that it uses the figure of an entertainer to conceptualize public life. However, *Centre Stage* dramatizes the production, circulation, and consumption of popular cinematic memory so as to contribute in more vital ways to Hong Kong's mass cultural conversation about itself.

While treating broadly familiar subject matter, *Centre Stage* expands the terms of the show-biz bio-pic by mobilizing a range of opinions and voices. The story of Ruan Lingyu is

placed within a dual historical context that opens up rather than closes down historical understanding. In rejecting a strict linear plotline, the film seeks out alternative tales of identity and mobility. At the same time, by presenting multiple viewpoints on how a public image gets constructed, the film encourages a dialectical reading of its themes. While one woman's life is remembered and celebrated, agency is conceptualized as a social rather than purely an individual force.⁶

Given Hong Kong's current historical situation, such an ambitious rewriting of the bio-pic makes aesthetic sense. The



Anita Mui in *Rouge*

ideology subscribed to by Hollywood producers—namely, that famous personages should be given clear motivation and character development, their stories told within the frame of a “rooting interest” that audiences understand—appears less tenable when viewed in the context of the inevitability of 1997. Instead of featuring men and women who struggle to command their own lives, a number of contemporary bio-pics from Hong Kong portray the great and the good trying, but failing, to take hold of a situation that is beyond their control.⁷

Centre Stage’s construction of a multiple temporal framework is especially important to the success of this project because of the very nature of the historical material under investigation. Kwan’s film remains true to the spirit of the bio-pic because it focuses on the public image of a person who remains inaccessible to us. (At the time of production, only six of Ruan’s films were known to be in existence and so available for research). For this reason, a large part of her story has had to be reconstructed out of lost objects, fragmented memories, and creative interpretations. Instead of buying into a realist

aesthetic that claims to be “true” and “authentic”, the film illustrates, in George F. Custen’s words, that all history “is a mediation, a set of discursive practices encoded in a time and often a place removed from their actual occurrence, and thus subject to some degree of restructuring” (11).

This act of restructuring constitutes the film’s *raison d’être*. The imminent eradication of Hong Kong’s current situation has made the process of memory retention extremely important, and the ability to explore lives in all of their historical complexity provides one means of preservation. After 1997, for example, Mandarin is almost certain to replace English and Cantonese as the city’s official language. Accordingly, the main characters in *Centre Stage* speak in a diversity of idioms, articulating hybrid identities through holding conversations in Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese, and English.

By such means, the film’s comparison of two cosmopolitan Chinese cities in historical time is presented through a deeply ambivalent form of nostalgia. As in *Rouge*, there is the suggestion that the past is more attractive, intense, and memorable

than the present. Yet it is a deliberately selective and 'unofficial' past. *Centre Stage* depicts the internationalism of 1930s Shanghai and 1990s Hong Kong so as to resist the unifying tendencies of Communist ideology. As Prasenjit Duara has demonstrated, the very act of writing historical narratives about the Chinese nation is fraught with difficulty. How can the diverse fragments of that huge imagined community be brought together as one?⁸ In line with a number of other recent films from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland, *Centre Stage* rewrites the 'official' version of past events by ignoring the partiality of state-directed narratives. If the opulent color schemes, production designs, and big-band music of the scenes set in the 1930s recall that particular decade with immense affection, the memory of post-liberation Maoism is sidestepped as Kwan and his colleagues claim allegiance with the pre-1949 leftist Chinese cinema.⁹

When, in the first scene, the director asks Maggie Cheung if she would like to be remembered fifty years from now, he does so while the two of them are looking at stills from movies Ruan Lingyu acted in during the 1930s, the great period of what Chris Berry terms "post-colonial" Chinese filmmaking. Cheung throws back her head and laughs, exclaiming of Ruan, "Isn't she a replica of myself?" On those words, the generic rule that bio-pic subjects should be treated as unique individuals is exposed as a fiction. Instead, the film goes on to show how Ruan Lingyu, Maggie Cheung, and a range of other individuals located in different but related times and places, lead somewhat parallel lives. Such loose connections will be explored throughout the entire film.

The result of all this revisionism is that our position of knowledge as spectators is co-opted. Since *Centre Stage* refuses to open with a title card proclaiming its "truthfulness", since it offers instead an interview scene between production personnel, we know right from the start that we are viewing a fictional reworking of Ruan's life. The opening scene establishes that the film's subject isn't going to be offered to us fully formed, but instead is constantly reinterpreted in the light of historical events that happened subsequent to her death. Even before we are given any of the beautifully shot dramatic reconstructions, then, we know that the reality-status of the information presented to us has been compromised.

It is significant that the contemporary black-and-white interview scenes are among the most Brechtian in the entire film. When Kwan talks with Cheung or Lawrence Ng, with Carina Lau (who plays the 1930s star Li Lili), or Tony Leung (as Cai Chusheng), the conversations are shot in an extremely flat manner. As the camera slowly pans between the actors, the backs of their heads, and the entire cinematic apparatus itself are visible in a large mirror situated behind them. Such a cold and formal documentary aesthetic contrasts starkly with the graceful tracking shots and elaborate lighting designs of the period reconstructions. And while the interview scenes tend not to actually question how suitable these modern Hong Kong actors are as impersonators of silent film stars, they do carry an implicit critique of performance. As *Centre Stage* is everywhere else so careful about how it presents its reconstructions, can there be any guarantee that the interviews them-

selves have not been staged with great care and forethought? Are they really as spontaneous as they seem?

To give some idea of how subtle and far-reaching these kinds of diegetic transformations are, I should describe Kwan's high style in more specific detail. *Centre Stage* as a whole is extremely difficult to segment - its mix of baffling scene transitions, flashforwards, and non-simultaneous voice-overs would make even Christian Metz spit in impotent rage—but one relatively autonomous segment that I would like to concentrate on is based around the filming of *New Woman* at Lianhua Studios.

This sequence captures both the shooting of a scene from Cai Chusheng's 1934 classic and the simultaneous filming of the reconstruction by the 1990s Hong Kong production team. It moves from the full-colored reconstruction of the past to a black and white depiction of the present. It opens in the 1934 diegesis, as Cai tells Ruan Lingyu how he would like her to act out a death-bed scene—even in your last moments you want to live, he explains, and I shall print bold title cards over your tragic face to make the point. The resulting take is a success: Ruan's character struggles, collapses in a hospital bed, and is mourned by family and friends. Cai wraps things up with a smile. However, after the director has shouted "Cut!", Ruan continues to weep softly under the white sheets (one of many images throughout the film which conflate her on and off-screen lives), while melancholic music plays on the soundtrack. As a lateral track traverses the length of the bed, the image shifts from deep browns and blues to sepia. Via a characteristically elegant crane shot that pulls back to a high angle view of the Hong Kong crew filming the scene, we hear Kwan's soft voice calling "Cut!", then giving further instructions to his team ("you forgot to lift up the bedsheet to see Maggie"). After a reverse shot gives us what appears to be a black and white still image of Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung acting in character, seated on the hospital bed with a camera behind them, there is a cut to footage of the real Ruan Lingyu death scene from *New Woman*, complete with the dramatic title cards that Cai Chusheng/Leung has already referred to. The camera pulls back once again to reveal this footage as itself part of a dramatic reconstruction, as we find ourselves in a 1930s screening room, where the movie is being run for a group of belligerent journalists. At this point, the image has

6. Stephen Teo suggests that since the screenplay marks the collaboration between critic Chiao Hsiung-ping and Kwan's regular scenarist, Qiu Dai Anping, the "crux of the film's dialectics" resides in the juxtaposition of two distinct writing styles—the "dialectical monochromatic and the historical". Stephen Teo, "Centre Stage", *Cinemaya* 14 (Winter 1991-92), p. 26.

7. It may be useful to distinguish here between such films (which include *Centre Stage* and *The Last Princess of Manchuria*, Fong Ling-ching's 1990 study of the infamous Kawashima Yoshiko), and the bio-pics of denial and reassurance, those titles (such as Alex Law's 1988 *Painted Faces*, about the Peking Opera troupe that housed Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, and Yuen Biao) which regress to the safety of nostalgic sentimentality.

8. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995).

9. For a similar argument concerning the work of such Mainland 5th Generation directors as Chen Kaige and Hu Mei, see Chris Berry, "From Post-Colonialism to Post-Socialism: The Chinese Context of the 5th Generation", in Klaus Eder and Deac Rossell (eds.), *New Chinese Cinema* (London, British Film Institute/ National Film Theatre, 1993), pp. 74-83.

returned to full color, and we are ready to move on to the next stage of the narrative.

DEATH AT WORK

With its deep colors and graceful camera movements, its concentration on emotional nuance and musical delicacy, this scene provides a textbook example of Stanley Kwan's high style. But it also provides a good indication of the film's overall preoccupation with the relationships that can be established between male director and female star. As Berenice Reynaud points out,¹⁰ Kwan has given a number of top Chinese actresses some of their most fulfilling roles (it could also be pointed out that he has done the same for a few leading men: Tony Leung and Chow Yun-Fat in *Love Unto Waste* and Leslie Cheung in *Rouge*, for example, are outstanding). The numerous references throughout *Centre Stage* to Marlene Dietrich's performance in *The Blue Angel* (1930) are enough to indicate the presence of a von-Sternberg-like empathy and fascination with the central female performer.

To be more precise, Ruan's relationships with her various

directors provides a parallel commentary on, and a range of alternatives to, the private relationships that were to ruin her life. The "trouble" with Ruan Lingyu in the context of the Republican Shanghai cinema can be taken to be one of consistency—in the 1930s, the on-and off-screen lives of female stars had to be consistent, and hers wasn't. The first reconstruction in *Centre Stage* takes place in a massage parlor, where a group of male Lianhua directors discuss the various possibilities offered by Ruan's star image. By the end of the film, we discover that even though that image could be stretched in a number of different directions, it snapped when the press found out that the woman herself was having an extra-marital affair. In Kwan's version of her life, the relationships Ruan forms with her directors and lovers act out variations on a theme, while her film work provides a creative space for the exploration of feelings that are denied off-screen expression.

Tony Rayns has rightly suggested that nothing is more touching in *Centre Stage* than the film's "respect and affection for the late Fei Mu, reviled by the Communists as a 'Rightist', but surely one of the great directors of his time".¹¹ Noted for such superb dramas as *Spring In A Small Town* (1948), Fei Mu is here resurrected as a sympathetic man with an egalitarian



and progressive attitude who understands Ruan's yearning emotionality. Indeed, it is Fei who provides the most moving testimony to the actress during the long funeral sequence that ends the film.

In this scene, as Ruan/Cheung's body is laid out in an open casket, a number of directors reminisce about her life and work. Fei's point of view is privileged, however, because he is allowed to deliver an extended monologue straight to the camera, thus breaking the illusionary nature of the bio-pic a little more. It is here that the film's utilization of a 'double temporal framework' becomes most complicated. At this moment both the 1930s and the 1990s, both the reconstructions and the contemporary footage, exist as one. For the first time, the two diegetic levels are shot in sumptuous color, which means that as Fei delivers his speech ("When she got half-drunk, she'd ask her friends: 'Can I be considered good?'" his words have to compete with a visual commentary on his performance—after a few seconds, a slight camera pan away from his face reveals the presence of two make-up artists working away on the "dead" Ruan Lingyu/Maggie Cheung behind him.

The final scene of the movie, then, presents a reconstruction of Ruan's funeral together with a documentary on the shooting of the scene itself by Kwan's cast and crew. (Some shots are accompanied by offscreen commands for the actors who are gathered around the death-bed to "be serious"). Yet even at this consummately Brechtian moment, the narrative still offers the kinds of satisfying pieces of dramatic closure that would round-up a more conventional bio-pic. We are given access to at least one moment that has already been referred to in the interviews but which we have not seen acted out before. Earlier on, the elderly Li Lili had recounted, in a 1991 talk with Kwan and Cheung, that she never cried at Ruan's funeral: now, the reconstruction gives us Carina Lau/Li refusing to cry. By such means, the end of *Centre Stage* fills in its narrative gaps at the very moment the reconstructions are explicitly shown to be manufactured out of contemporary private fantasies.

Or, again, consider how shots of Maggie Cheung lying in her open casket are edited next to shots of the filming of that same scene (Kwan needs another take because Cheung is visibly breathing). In its very last seconds, the whole funeral scene is put into dialectical tension when a black-and-white photo of the real Ruan on her actual death-bed is run behind the final credits.¹² However, even this cannot be taken as a simply "authentic" moment, for it is accompanied by Siu Chung's wonderful theme song, which has appeared in various arrangements throughout the narrative. Earlier in the funeral scene it has echoed around the studio in a contemporary pop version, but now it is presented differently, revealed, irresistibly, as a fake reconstruction of a 1930s recording.

Such use of "authentic" inserts from Ruan's life and films are willfully fetishistic. In general, the most breathtaking moments in *Centre Stage* occur when actual footage of Ruan Lingyu herself is placed within the narrative flow. Aside from allowing the viewer to appreciate her skill and charisma, the recontextualisation of her original performances within a contemporary high style aesthetic adds to the intrigue of the 1930s footage. While the fetishistic "aura" of these few frames

of film is enhanced, the feeling is also created that the reconstructions must stand in lieu of the lost films. And, in turn, the absence of the lost films provides a space within which new ideas about contemporary Hong Kong subjectivity can be inserted.

There is a scene very early on in the film, for example, when Ruan walks out of her house and lies down in the snow outside. At first the viewer is not quite sure what is going on. Is she rehearsing? Is she acting for a hidden camera? Is she emoting in private? The following shot, however, answers our questions by showing us her perform the same actions in a film that a title card informs us is no longer in existence. By such means, our previous speculations about Ruan's behavior are validated as legitimate even while we are given an "impossible" aesthetic reconstruction. Similarly, when Cai Chushang/Leung looks at the censored death-bed scene from *New Woman* I described above, he holds the film strip up to the light and an inserted close-up reveals a black-and-white image of Maggie Cheung's, not Ruan Lingyu's, face. As the original is gone forever, a new source must take its place.

It is no accident that in *Centre Stage* the fetishistic concentration on the "aura" of the lost object is provided by the image of a dead woman, because dead women haunt Kwan's films (cf. the ghostly courtesan from *Rouge*, the murdered actress in *Love Unto Waste*). However, it is here that one possible criticism of the film arises. Despite Maggie Cheung's success at the Hong Kong Film Awards and at the Berlin Film Festival, domestic and international critics seem to be pretty much divided on whether or not she gives a successful interpretation of Ruan Lingyu. Berenice Reynaud suggests that Cheung's beauty and talent have not yet translated into a secure Western reputation because her image goes against our Orientalist fantasies of Chinese women. Female Chinese stars should suffer beautifully (Gong Li, Ruan Lingyu) but Cheung's star image still circulates as that of the good-time, modern Hong Kong girl (cf. she has been seen most recently by North American audiences as Jackie Chan's girlfriend in Stanley Tong's 1992 comedy *Supercop: Police Story 3*). While it is certainly true that the bulk of Cheung's output is located within the popular fantasy/action/comedy veins—witness her performances in such diverse films as *Iceman Cometh* (Fok Yiu Leung, 1989), *The Heroic Trio* (Ching Siu-tung/Johnny To, 1992), and *A Fishy Story* (Anthony Chan, 1991)—her most spectacular successes have been in dramatic roles. With *Centre Stage* and *Full Moon in New York*, Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and *Ashes of Time* (1994), Yim Ho's melodrama *Red Dust* (1990) and Ann Hui's *Song of the Exile* (1991), Cheung has propelled herself into the ranks of serious dramatic actresses.

10. Berenice Reynaud, "Glamour and Suffering: Gong Li and the History of Chinese Stars", in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (ed.), *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993), p. 28.

11. Tony Rayns. "Hard Boiled", *Sight and Sound*, vol. 2, no. 4 (August 1992), p. 23.

12. This original photograph, together with many others that provide the basis for the "look" of the reconstructions in *Centre Stage*, is collected in Cheng Jihua (ed.), *Ruan Lingyu* (Beijing, Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1985). I am grateful to Paola Voci for lending me her copy of this book.



Ch'in Han and Maggie Cheung in *Centre Stage*

Without ever wishing to deny my own love and admiration for Maggie Cheung's work, I should acknowledge that I find her performance in *Centre Stage* something of a problem. While her acting often has an appealing camp or ironic quality, her performance as Ruan Lingyu does not offer the principles of estrangement that Brecht sought from his actors—which is to say that while Kwan's mix of high style and black-and-white documentary aesthetics achieves an alienation effect, the central performance itself does not separate the actress out from the role she plays. There is a tension in the film between the ostensible naturalism of Cheung's performance and the revisionist principles of the *auteur's* style. If one adds to this the fact that, as far as I am aware, Cheung's own off-screen image does not resonate with the same kinds of scandalous and tragic associations that Ruan Lingyu embodies, the result is a rupture, a lack of fit between star image and role.

When Maggie Cheung throws back her head and laughs that Ruan Lingyu is a "replica of myself", I'm not completely

convinced. Like the modern, cynical woman, played by Emily Chu, from 1980s Hong Kong in *Rouge* who envies Fleur her romantic passion, one cannot quite imagine Maggie Cheung killing herself for love. Perhaps this is part of the point of Kwan's film, but I can't help feeling that it's a shame the director's first choice for the part, Anita Mui, was not available. To me, apart from bearing an uncanny similarity to photographs of Ruan Lingyu circa-*New Woman*, it more tellingly suggests the kind of Brechtian separation of actor and role that the performance in *Centre Stage* demands. Aside from the fact that Mui's performances habitually embody a greater self-reflexivity than Cheung's, there is also a greater fit, in both her on and off-screen images, with the politics of scandal and tragedy. In the early 1990s, for example, Anita Mui had to be placed under a police witness protection scheme after she testified against some triad members who murdered one of her producers in a hospital bed. In 1994 she was denied immigration papers to Canada. All of this contributes to the feeling that Mui's mix of erotic danger and world-weary tragedy better suggests Ruan Lingyu than Maggie Cheung's good time girl. And whereas Cheung generally doesn't die in her films, Anita Mui suffers and dies extremely well (cf. *Rouge*, *A Better Tomorrow 3* [a.k.a. *Love and Death in Saigon*, Tsui Hark, 1989], *The Last Princess of Manchuria*).

FALLEN WOMAN/FALLEN CITY

No matter who performs the role, though, Stanley Kwan's high style would not be for everyone. Like Wong Kar-wai, whose work he admires and supports, Kwan is sometimes perceived as being too opulent and melodramatic, too mannered—all

those deep colors and crane shots are seen as distracting, an indication of flash not substance. If the reception of other contemporary Hong Kong movies is anything to go by, it would seem to be the case that the majority of international audiences still prefer strong linear plot lines to the kind of emotional, symbolic and associational narrative links that are developed in *Centre Stage*. On the other hand, both Kwan and Wong Kar-wai have their share of admirers, and I am certainly not alone in feeling that their charming, fragmented tales of lost love and confused souls perfectly encapsulate the mood of *fin-de-siècle* Hong Kong.

In other words, films like *Centre Stage* and *Rouge* introduce a level of mystery and ambiguity into their stories about doomed and tragic lives in historical time. As in Wong's *Chungking Express* (1994), Kwan exhibits a fascination with mirrors and other reflected surfaces, a theme which suggests the fragmentary nature of modern Hong Kong subjectivity while also documenting the material reality of the city's own

public spaces. However, there is still a clear difference in sensibility between the two directors.

As a number of other critics have already pointed out, neither Wong Kar-wai nor Stanley Kwan simply reproduce the generic patterns of popular Hong Kong cinema. Instead, each uses genre (the gangster film, ghost drama, martial arts epic, biopic) as a means of gaining access to personal stories of love and emotion. But Wong Kar-wai, in his more recent work at least, has projected a form of humor and optimism that seems more willing to imagine a future beyond 1997 (which may be one reason why his ostensibly less somber films are more popular with the likes of Quentin Tarantino).

By contrast, the delicate mirror shots, cardboard backdrops and fragile crane movements in *Centre Stage* can be taken as being more resigned and pessimistic. Kwan's high style is used to extend the theme of Hong Kong as a lost or fallen city. This historical analogy is entirely suited to *Centre Stage*, firstly, because of the personal nature of the bio-pic: once again, trial scenes are used to suggest the morality lessons that can be learnt from the historical personage's validation or fall—in this case, Ruan Lingyu is held up to public scrutiny and hounded from pillar to post. Secondly, however, the melodramatic imagination is especially conducive to narratives of the lost city in the Chinese context because it can be tied in with the historical figure of the fallen woman.

Certainly, both Western and European fiction and cinema of the 1930s and 1940s codified the lost city and its fallen inhabitants in gendered terms—Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, for example, is fairly explicit on this score.¹³ (Kwan is on record as saying that this is one of his favorite books; it was also made into a film in 1984 by Hong Kong 'New Wave' director Ann Hui, who had been one of Kwan's early mentors). In *Centre Stage*, then, 1930s Shanghai and 1990s Hong Kong are clearly contrasted as modern, cosmopolitan cities that suffer invasion by an occupying force (the Japanese and Communists, respectively), and this theme is worked out through the experiences of a tragically doomed yet beautiful woman who represents the city itself. While Kwan's *mise-en-scène* often traps Ruan within bars and other restrictive framings, as in classic films by Ophüls, Sirk, and Minnelli, his high style aesthetic pushes such ironic set-ups one step further by reconstructing the original meaning of Ruan's films around the affective sensibilities of contemporary Hong Kong subjectivity.

A reconstruction from early on in the film (which takes place, like so many other melodramatic scenes, on a staircase), shows Li Lili/Carina Lau parodying one of Ruan's famous performances in the film *Little Toys* (Sun Yu, 1933). Clutching her mouth in terror, shouting, "The enemy is coming! The enemy is coming!" for appreciative laughs from her colleagues at Lianhua, Li acts out a scene where Ruan's character cowers in the face of the Japanese invasion. The moment is politically overdetermined, offering not only a comment on the vexed question of political censorship (1930s Chinese films were not meant to criticize the Japanese; 1990s Hong Kong films are not meant to criticize the Mainland Chinese), but also an allegorical reading of Hong Kong's present situation. While this device is familiar

from a number of other Hong Kong dramas like *Boat People* (Ann Hui, 1982), *Hong Kong 1941* (Leong Po-chih, 1984), and *Shanghai 1920* (Leong Po-chih, 1991), it has seldom been deployed more imaginatively than here. When we later see the heart-stirring footage of Ruan and Li themselves acting out the consequences of the Japanese invasion in the original footage, a 1930s Chinese text has been reframed and reconstructed to speak directly about Hong Kong's own impending "invasion".

For Ackbar Abbas, the melodramatic poignancy of modern Hong Kong cinema is embodied in the fact that the city is discovering itself at the very moment of its disappearance—as the city is "lost", it comes into view. In many of the best contemporary films from the settlement, the diegetic past becomes confused with the diegetic present, and both are implicated in nostalgia for an age yet to come. The splendid recreations of 1930s Hong Kong and 1930s Shanghai in *Rouge* and *Centre Stage* supply acts of remembrance—just as Shanghai's way of life changed, Hong Kong, too, may become frozen, trapped at the wrong end of a fifty year time zone. *Centre Stage* itself draws to a close with the camera tracking into an empty Hong Kong studio, then switching to black-and-white footage from 1991 of the Lianhua studio itself being razed to the ground. If, in the make-believe world of filmmaking, studios are sites where real emotions can be manufactured on celluloid, the work of Stanley Kwan affirms the value of pan-Chinese cinematic and affective bonds wherever they are to be found.

It is especially revealing, finally, that *Centre Stage* chooses not to represent the exterior space of Hong Kong itself. Even though we are given many interviews that were shot in the present day city, there is no visual or spatial exploration of its geography. It is telling that a reconstruction scene from 1932 moves Ruan from war-torn Shanghai to Hong Kong, but does not depict the reality of the colony. In this scene, a transitional cut takes us from an extreme long shot of buildings in Shanghai to a cramped medium shot of a Hong Kong interior. But as there is no establishment of the space of this new location, the implication is that Hong Kong itself has been visually eradicated. Kwan refuses to provide the traditional establishing shot of the new location because he wants to suggest that the actress's new destination is a lost space, one that has been displaced by the emergence of a new centre of representational power. Following on from this train of thought, it is perfectly in keeping that while relaxing in Hong Kong, Ruan Lingyu should be thinking of her mother and daughter back home in Shanghai. Once again, text and subtext are collapsed into one. For while researching and shooting their film, or while watching the finished version projected in Hong Kong theaters in 1991, Maggie Cheung, Stanley Kwan, and everyone else involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of *Centre Stage* would also have had China on their mind.

13. For an extended discussion of this theme, see Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender* (Stanford, University of Stanford Press, 1996). It might be interesting to analyze such 1930s Chinese films as *The Goddess* (about prostitution) in light of Lea Jacobs' excellent work on codes of censorship in 1930s Hollywood. See her *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film 1928-1942* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

FROM HONG KONG TO HOLLYWOOD:

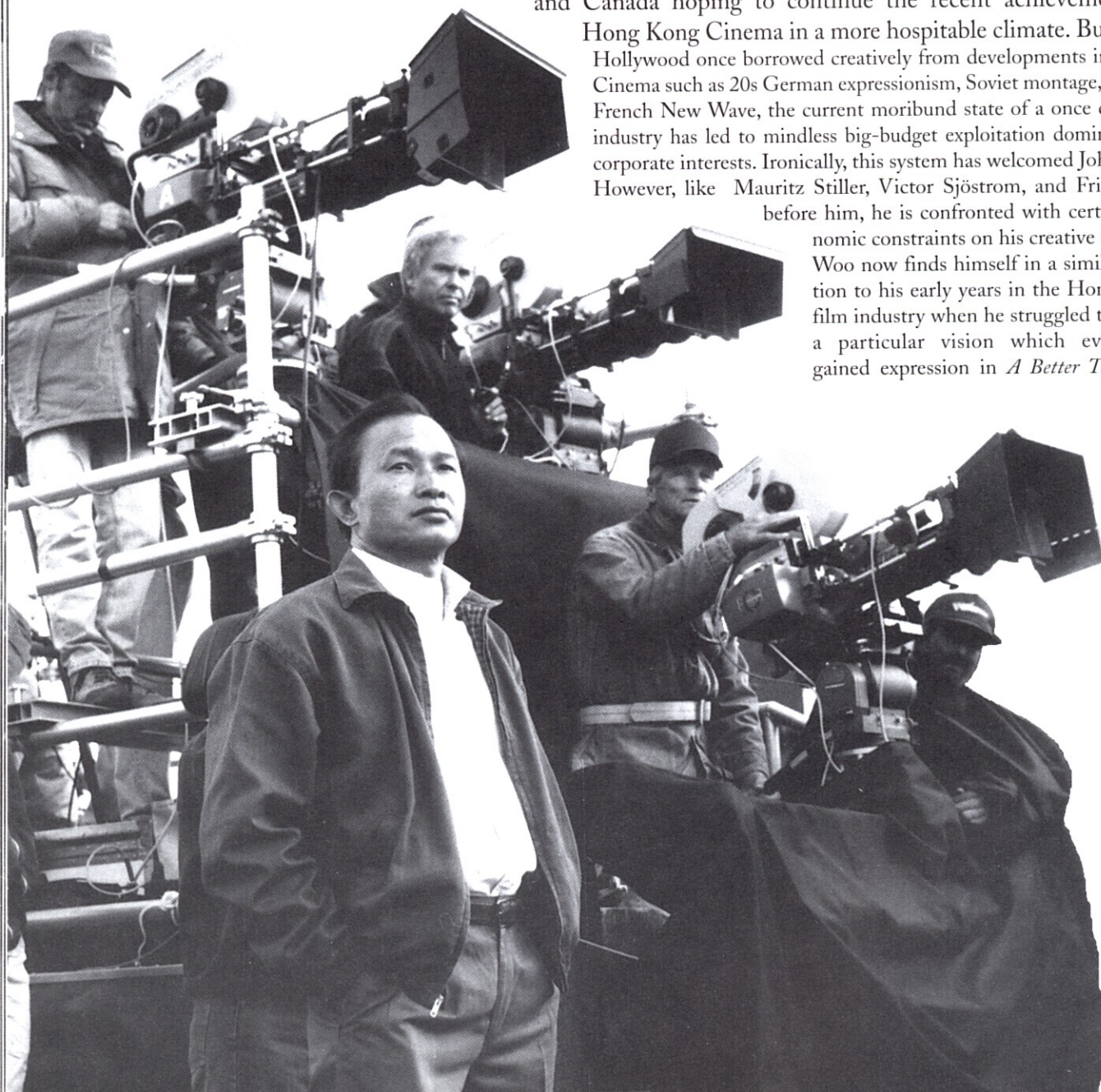
John Woo and his Discontents

by Tony Williams

IN 1997, HONG KONG RETURNS TO THE CHINESE MAINLAND, AN EVENT viewed with great apprehension by most of its inhabitants after an arrogant and callous betrayal by Margaret Thatcher. As a result, many of Hong Kong's creative talents have sought refuge in the United States and Canada hoping to continue the recent achievements of

Hong Kong Cinema in a more hospitable climate. But while Hollywood once borrowed creatively from developments in World Cinema such as 20s German expressionism, Soviet montage, and the French New Wave, the current moribund state of a once dynamic industry has led to mindless big-budget exploitation dominated by corporate interests. Ironically, this system has welcomed John Woo. However, like Mauritz Stiller, Victor Sjöström, and Fritz Lang

before him, he is confronted with certain economic constraints on his creative abilities. Woo now finds himself in a similar position to his early years in the Hong Kong film industry when he struggled to define a particular vision which eventually gained expression in *A Better Tomorrow*



John Woo

(1986). John Woo faces a far more dangerous threat to his abilities than any posed by the 1997 return of Hong Kong to Mainland China or Triad involvement in his home industry—contemporary Hollywood.

Woo's first two Hollywood films, *Hard Target* (1993) and *Broken Arrow* (1996) are mixed commodities. *Broken Arrow* is the more disappointing of the two. Written by Graham Yost, the scenarist of *Speed* (1994), it is little different from Hollywood's run-of-the-mill action exploitation. Borrowing much from Steven Seagal's *Under Siege 2* (1995)³, but lacking Eric Bogosian's deliberately hilarious "comedian as villain" performance, *Broken Arrow* deals with such Woo themes as friendship and betrayal, themes also common to the Shaw Brothers' work of veteran director Chang Che whom Woo worked with in the early 70s. B-3 Stealth Bomber pilot Vic Deakins (John Travolta) betrays his co-pilot Riley Hale (Christian Slater) by stealing two nuclear weapons to blackmail America. The film begins promisingly enough with a boxing tournament between both characters, an introductory device anticipating future conflict. However, both it and the twenty-dollar bill wager are intrusive metaphorical devices thrown into the narrative and weighing it down by over-laborious symbolization. Although Woo's characteristic slow-motion visual motifs appear briefly in the film, they are superficial and random, scattered within the narrative as if to assure Woo's followers that an author somehow exists in an over-budgeted special effects text featuring two mediocre actors. *Broken Arrow* is a huge disappointment in the light of Woo's Hong Kong achievements, casting doubt on the future prospects of any proposed Hollywood reunion with Chow Yun-Fat in *The Corrupters*.

Hard Target was much more promising. It reveals Woo attempting to synthesize Hong Kong motifs with a classical Hollywood tradition. Woo's hero Chance Boudreaux (Jean-Claude Van Damme), although not yet on the streets like fellow Vietnam veterans Douglas Binder and Elijah Roper, is precariously near to becoming a homeless person. *Hard Target's* world depicts an American society denying the reality of the plight of street people growing in number everywhere. The film is set in a New Orleans resounding with dark elements from America's violent past. New Orleans is not just the city of Southern gentility, jazz, and culture. It is also a city formerly known for flourishing pre-Civil War slave markets, race riots, and violence (most recently, the publicized murder of tourists).

Many reviews recognized Chuck Pfarrer's screenplay as a variation of the most filmed short story in American cinema—"The Most Dangerous Game" written in 1924 by Richard Connell. But this was not a studio-imposed screenplay. Pfarrer stated that John Woo actually chose it out of the fifty or so American scripts offered because "he liked the story."⁴ The writer is also known for scripts such as *Dark Man* and *Navy Seals* and is a former Navy Seal who was injured in the 1983 Beirut bombing.⁵ *Hard Target* is really a more composite production than the exclusively American action movie Universal studios finally marketed after it had performed editorial butchery. The version released in Japan is more visually dynamic than the American one.⁶ Comparison of the

American and Japanese versions not only provides more footage for examination but also reveals further evidence of the stylistic and thematic synthesis Woo had attempted between American and Hong Kong cinema in *Hard Boiled* (1992). These were all edited out of the American version due to unsympathetic responses by Van Damme fans at previews, concerns over the level of violence by the studio, and a desire to market the film as a commodified American action movie to an audience supposedly unaware of Woo's achievements in Hong Kong cinema.⁷

Woo's stylistic features dominate the Japanese version. As Lance Henriksen noted in *The Village Voice*, Woo's violent representations resemble more a modern dance "balletic" recital rather than the type of cynical stylistic approaches common to most examples of American action cinema—"you've got this incredible *dance* movement." Woo also draws similar analogies. "When I fell in love with movies for the first time, it was the musical movies. Like *West Side Story* and Gene Kelly movies, Fred Astaire. The musical movies made me get a strong feeling for the movement, and the beauty of the action, and the beauty of the editing, and the beauty of the visuals."⁸ Furthermore, Woo clearly models Henriksen's

2. According to Tom Weisser, "Editorial," *Asian Trash Cinema* 11 (1995), Hollywood plans to remake two classics of Hong Kong New Wave Cinema. Both Ringo Lam's nihilistic *Full Contact* (1991) and Alex Law's *Painted Faces* (1988), the latter a touching biographical work about the early years of Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, and Yuen Biao, are destined for recycling within the Hollywood slaughterhouse. Significantly, Ringo Lam directed Jean-Claude Van Damme's recent film *Maximum Risk* (1996), which made him the only Hollywood star so far to have benefitted from two major Hong Kong directors.

3. I wish to thank Susan Morrison for this reference as well as her helpful editorial suggestions.

4. See Barbara Scharres, "The Hard Road to Hard Target," *American Cinematographer* (September 1993): 69. According to Ken Hall, Pfarrer's original screenplay contained more literate dialogue but was rewritten to accommodate Van Damme's linguistic talents.

5. Pfarrer's modern military background suggestively complements those Ching Dynasty warrior heroes celebrated in works such as *Blood Brothers* (a.k.a. *Chinese Vengeance*, 1973) directed by Chang Che, a film on which John Woo worked as assistant director. For *Chinese Vengeance*, see the review by Tony Rayns in *Monthly Film Bulletin* 41.487 (1974): 172. The film starred Ti Lung and David Chiang. Woo used Ti Lung in his *Better Tomorrow* films after his heyday as a Shaw Brothers star to compare with the newer generation of stars represented by Chow Yun-Fat. Woo admitted he only directed 60% of the uneven *Just Heroes* (1989) as a retirement present for his mentor Chang Che who is also credited as executive producer. The film featured well-known Shaw Brothers stars Che directed in the seventies such as Ti Lung, John (a.k.a. David) Chiang, Chen Kuan-Tai, as well as Danny Lee from *The Killer*. The Criterion laserdisc notes to *The Killer* also mentions the influence of other Chang Che films on Woo such as *Golden Swallow* (1968) and *One Armed Swordsman* (1967) as well as former stars such as Wang Yu (who appeared in these films) and Takakura Ken of the Japanese *yakuza-eiga* genre which stressed similar bonds of loyalty and friendship as those in Woo's later films. Woo also admitted that a *yakuza-eiga* Takakura Ken movie (whose title he has forgotten) also influenced *The Killer*. For further information on Che see Tian Yan, "The Fallen Idol—Zhang Che in Retrospect," *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies. The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival*. Hong Kong: Urban Council Publications, 1984, 41–46.

6. The version is currently available from Video Search of Miami. It represents the cut most nearest Woo's original conception as well as containing three important sequences dropped from the Japanese release print.

7. I owe this information to Ken Hall who is writing a book on John Woo.

8. See Harry Allen, "Guncrazy in the Bayou," *Village Voice* 38 (May 25, 1993): 18, for these remarks by Henriksen and Woo.

frustrated expressions at Chance's survival on Lino Ventura's constantly frustrated hit man in the hilarious comedy *L'Emmerdeur/A Pain in the A...* (1973). But more significant is Woo's decision to make another version of *The Most Dangerous Game*.

This is far from accidental. Familiar with many Western and European movies and often re-working them in his films, Woo understands important implications within his source material. In the original movie version of *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932 a.k.a. *The Hounds of Zaroff*), big game hunter Bob Rainsford (Joel McCrea) finds himself confronting his dark alter ego, Russian Count Zaroff (Leslie Banks) who now enjoys hunting humans rather than animals. In *The Most Dangerous Game*, Rainsford finds himself the hunted rather than the hunter. Prior to his shipwreck casting him on Zaroff's island, he blandly asserts in answer to a question asking him whether he would ever change places with his prey, "Well, that's something I'll never have to decide. Listen here you fellows, the world's divided into two kinds of people: the hunter and the hunted, Well, luckily, I'm a hunter. And nothing could ever change that." He experiences a reversal of his former situation and tells Eve Trowbridge (Fay Wray) that he now empathizes with his former quarry when Zaroff's hounds pursue them. Hoping that his guest will pursue his interests to their logical conclusions, Zaroff challenges him to join the sport. As Zaroff gazes on Rainsford in close-up, he is lit up in demonic imagery, an ideological cinematic technique

of disavowing dangerous social and historical situations by recourse to the mystifying realms of the Gothic and supernatural.

Woo's intention in making another version of *The Most Dangerous Game* involved a creative synthesis between Western and Hong Kong cinematic traditions which characterizes his work. Former mercenary Fouchon (Lance Henriksen) provides human victims for jaded billionaires to hunt in a 90s version of "The Most Dangerous Game." His biker "dogs" are the violent cyclists from *Hard Boiled* transplanted into an American context. Whereas their Hong Kong counterparts are employed by a Triad gangster using a hospital to smuggle arms, the American "dogs" are the new "Hounds of Zaroff." Fouchon is the new Count Zaroff with Chance and Natasha Binder (Yancy Butler) representing the new versions of Rainsford and Eve Trowbridge. As Fouchon explains to one client, his form of the most dangerous game is really a deregulated version of "legal" activities performed by governments across the world. "It has always been the pleasure of the few to hunt the many. All we do is provide the same opportunity for private citizens like yourself. We pride ourselves on taking combat veterans—soldiers, policemen, fighter pilots. Men who kill for their governments kill with impunity. The same governments make murder their sole preserve."

Fouchon's activities are not just confined to America. As he states, "There's always some unhappy little corner of the globe where we can ply our trade," whether Rio during carnival time

Hard Target

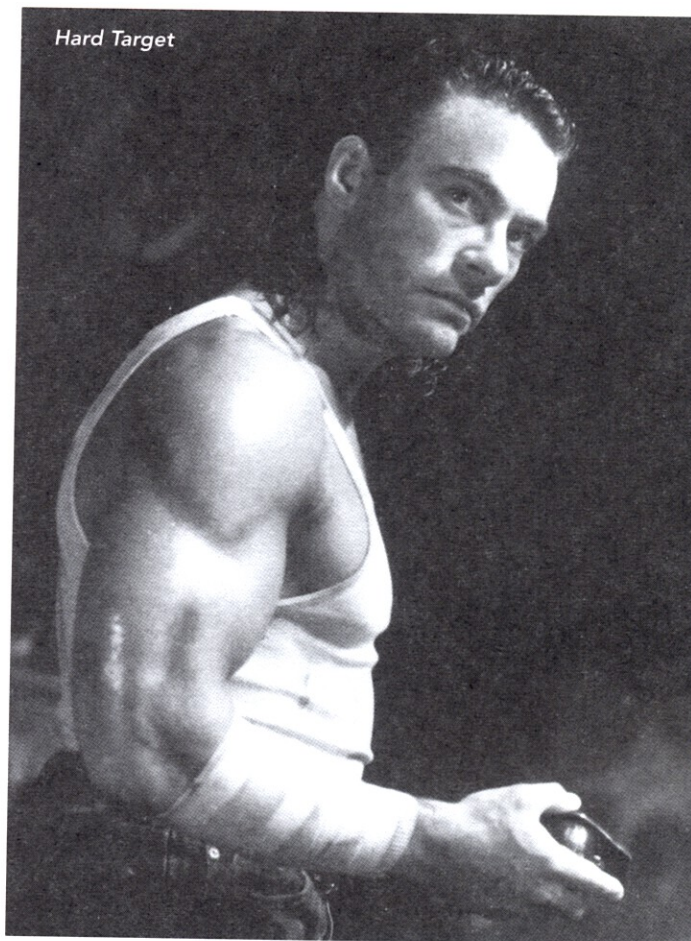


or the former Yugoslavia. Prior to deciding to hunt Chance, Fouchon tells Pick (Arnold Vosloo) about relocating to Eastern Europe. "We can work there for years." The former Iron Curtain territories now undergoing brutal conversion to capitalism are ripe for his particular brand of exploitation.

Fouchon provides a service for rich capitalists in this new global economy. Although *Hard Target* contains relatively few explicit Hong Kong associations characteristic of Woo's other films, certain features do occur. The infernoesque lighting associated with apocalyptic representations of the return to Mainland China in films as diverse as *Tiger Cage* (1988), *A Bullet in the Head* (1989), *Dr. Lamb* (1992) and *Run and Kill* (1993), also occur in *Hard Target*. But whereas these Hong Kong films emphasize Hong Kong's geographical plight in relation to the Mainland, *Hard Target* emphasizes the equally devastating threat of Western capitalism. The hybrid nature of Hong Kong Cinema is also aware of threats presented by Western and Japanese capitalism to local values. These usually occur as background textual elements in instances such as the Japanese Airline sign featured during Mark's brutal beating in *A Better Tomorrow* and the Western role of the betrayer character in Woo's films, especially those featuring Waise Lee as capitalist-motivated villain (*A Better Tomorrow*, *A Bullet in the Head* and David Lam's 1993 *First Shot*). Hell is also present in the New Orleans of *Hard Target* both in the mean streets of the French Quarter and in the Bayou warehouse of discarded Mardi Gras masks.

Unlike facile representations of homelessness in Hollywood films such as *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986) and *Life Stinks* (1990), Woo treats the subject with seriousness and sensitivity. During his early childhood, Woo's family also experienced homelessness and was rescued from starvation by Roman Catholic social workers. Professing Christian beliefs, Woo, however, never remains exclusively on the metaphysical realm since he also asserts those critical Biblical Prophetic social justice values often ignored in contemporary misappropriations of religion. When Natasha Binder searches for her father, Detective Carmine Mitchell (Kasi Lemmons) suggests she try the local missions. At Our Lady of Mission Charity, she meets homeless Viet Nam veteran Elijah Roper (Willie Carpenter) who wears the 101st "Screaming Eagles" Airborne Division insignia on his combat jacket. From Natasha's photograph, he recognizes her father as a former member of the Marine Force 'Recon' unit, the same military group Silver Star veteran Chance belonged to. As Elijah tells Natasha about her father's predicament, Woo inserts separate dissolves showing street people who are outcasts from the American Dream—elderly woman, middle-aged man, and black youngsters. Ironically, despite his elite combat status later enlisting him in Fouchon's most dangerous game, Elijah finds himself stereotyped by condescending white tourists in the French Quarter as a scrounging homeless person and not as a wounded man desperately in need of help. During Elijah's last moments of life, an arrogant white man tells him, "Go get a job." Another (played by brother of executive producer, Sam Raimi) ignores his desperate pleas for help, brusquely yelling at him, "Hey man, I ain't got no change, man." After this, Woo intercuts

Hard Target



Broken Arrow



three freeze frame shots of Roper's realization of approaching death and matches them with guns held by Fouchon's men. Roper stretches out his arms in a crucified gesture as he undergoes social martyrdom in the mean carnivalesque streets of New Orleans.

Chance Boudreaux, Douglas Binder, and Elijah Roper are all former military men fallen upon hard times, living on the streets. Although Chance initially helps Natasha to pay his merchant seaman union dues, he eventually becomes morally and emotionally involved with her quest to find her father. Like Roper, he is caring and sympathetic towards her dilemma. Natasha cannot understand why her father never asked her for help when he became homeless. Chance replies, "I've been there myself on the street. It's hard. It's hard to put your hand out. Because he loved you so much, he didn't want to pull you into it." Binder also refused charity offered by his former landlady over delaying rent after he lost his job. The scene where Natasha learns about this from the landlady begins significantly with a foreground shot of a bird cage. The camera cranes up to reveal both women in an overhead shot. This reference is not accidental. Birds are predominantly associated with Chance throughout *Hard Target*, metaphorically depicting him as a free spirit trapped in a fallen world of late capitalism. It is a key Woo motif familiar to viewers from *The Killer* as well as his uncredited script contributions of the dove in the opening images of Chow Yun-Fat's last Hong Kong film, *Peace Hotel* (1995).⁹ The opening shot of the birdcage highlights the major theme of *Hard Target*—the entrapment of human beings by an uncaring and brutal system. Woo suggestively prepares the audience for Chance's second appearance in the film. He dissolves from the birthday cake wish made by

Detective Mitchell (who has decided to work double duty shifts at her desk during the city police strike which has made Fouchon's activities possible) to a shot of a solitary seagull on the shores of New Orleans. The camera then tracks right revealing Chance gazing at the bird. When Natasha attempts enlisting his help, seagull sounds appear prominently on the soundtrack. Later, a seagull flies in slow-motion inside Chance's dilapidated apartment directing him to two dog-tags hanging on the wall. By its action the bird intuitively suggests that Chance return to the scene of Binder's death and search for the undiscovered dog tag penetrated by a deadly steel arrow. A pigeon later perches on Chance's shoulder prior to his battle in the Mardi Gras warehouse. Near the end of the film, he avenges a bird shot at by one of Fouchon's "dogs". Chance also descends on a Mardi Gras float, designed to resemble a giant bird, when he fires upon Fouchon's men. Chance's association with birds in *Hard Target* not only suggestively evokes those traditional images of the Catholic Saint Francis of Assisi showing him with birds but also suggests heroic qualities characterizing old Chinese knightly heroes now existing in capitalist hells.¹⁰

Chance of *Hard Target* is a modern representative of this ancient ideal. He is trapped in a late-capitalist world with its own exploitative version of the "most dangerous game." Like Triad "big brothers" in the *Better Tomorrow* films, Fouchon and Pick have sold out to the dark values of modern capitalism. Although they superficially resemble Woo's Jean-Pierre Melville-inspired assassin figures such as Chong in *A Better Tomorrow 2* and "Mad Dog" of *Hard Boiled*¹¹, they have no redeeming codes of honor. Their dark clothes and behavior patterns mark them as demonic figures. While Binder and Roper are Viet Nam veterans, Fouchon is a former mercenary and ex-Foreign Legion veteran. His silver flask has a Foreign Legion insignia. With his Lucifer-like widow's peak hairline, Pick Van Cleef's appearance has apocalyptic associations. When Chance sees Pick at their first meeting, Woo matches close-ups of Chance (the first emphasizing his eyes) to those of Pick as thunder ominously booms on the soundtrack. The Japanese version of *Hard Target* emphasizes these sounds, making it clear that Chance has supernatural insights into the nature of his adversary. Pick's surname also evokes Lee Van Cleef's ironically-named "Angel Eyes" bounty hunter from Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966). Before their final gun battle, both Chance and Pick occupy opposite ends of the frame. Separated by a dividing wall, Woo clearly recognizes the twin-brother features characterizing these adversaries. However, unlike Link Jones's (Gary Cooper) regret over his reluctant killing of cousin Claude (John Dehner) in Anthony Mann's *Man of the West* (1958), Chance realizes the necessity for the battle. Both Pick and Fouchon are too corrupted by capitalist values to have any redeeming features left. Finally, in a scene cut from the American print, Woo later matches dissolves of the demonically-lit Mardi Gras masks in the warehouse sequence with images of the paranoid Fouchon. Anguished over the loss of Pick, Fouchon depicts himself as a satanic presence. "You can't kill me. There isn't any country in the world I've never fought in. I'm on every battlefield." But



Woo also presents Fouchon as a man of culture. In one brilliant sequence, Fouchon plays Beethoven's *Appassionata* on the piano as he plans his next dangerous game. Woo originally inserted footage of African safari hunting in this sequence so audiences could easily enter into Fouchon's mind. The scene provides a further link to *The Most Dangerous Game* especially when we remember that Count Zaroff was a big game hunter. For Fouchon, Beethoven's original Romantic creativity has now become perverted into bloodshed and violence, a perversion similar to Alex's musical tastes in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1972). The excised footage depicts African native hunters spearing defenseless gazelles while unseen white hunters shoot down elephants. However as twentieth century history amply demonstrates, refined tastes in literature and music do not necessarily guarantee that its acolytes are necessarily sympathetic or even humane. Pierre Bourdieu states that qualities of "good taste" are really ideological weapons in the armory of cultural capitalism no matter how many assert apolitical arguments concerning the universal moral redemptive "genius" nature of Beethoven, Mozart, and other figures in the Western canon.¹² As Fouchon plays a refined piano composition, violence and oppression constitute his particular brand of cultural capital.

Although Woo reserves freeze frames for the deaths of Binder and Roper, he often draws parallels between Chance and Fouchon by using similar slow-motion imagery for their appearances in various parts of the film. The device is not merely technical. It emphasizes the supernatural associations both men have. The battle in *Hard Target* also involves a struggle between the forces of Good and Evil. Woo often

shoots Chance fighting in slow-motion and then cuts to normal speed. Far from being a showmanship display of mere technical virtuosity, it reveals Chance as a figure operating within different levels of time befitting his status as embodying old concepts of "knightly" vales as well as being a modern hero fallen from grace in an inhospitable world. Woo films Uncle Douvee (Wilford Brimley) retreating from his successful assault on Fouchon's men initially in slow-motion, and then in normal speed. Douvee rides away, the arrow quiver on his back making him resemble ancient paintings of Chinese and Japanese warriors, Zen Buddhist monk figures in Hong Kong's popular *Chinese Ghost Story* series, and performers in Peking Opera.

Hard Target moves towards its apocalyptic climax in the Mardi Gras warehouse. The building is a graveyard of carnival artifacts left to rot in the humid interior after they have served their purpose in the annual festival. These throwaway items

9. For Woo's probable influence on this film see Tom Weisser, "Peace Hotel," *Asian Trash Cinema: The Book (Part 2)*, (Miami, Florida: Vital Sounds Inc., 1995), 104. Although directed by Wai Ka Fei, Woo agreed to act as producer at the request of Chow Yun-Fat who wrote the actual story.

10. See Tony Williams, "To Live and Die in Hong Kong: The Crisis Cinema of John Woo," *cineACTION* 36 (1995): 46; "Space, Place, and Spectacle in the Films of John Woo," *Cinema Journal* (forthcoming).

11. According to Erik Sulev, "Mad Dog" is played by former Shaw Brothers leading martial artist Cheung Jue Lun. See "A Hard Look at *Hard-Boiled*," *Asian Trash Cinema* 1.3 (1992): 24. Rather than the current emphasis on masculinity, a major study remains to be written about the important cultural influence of both the Chang Che and Shaw Brothers era of Hong Kong Cinema on the work of John Woo.

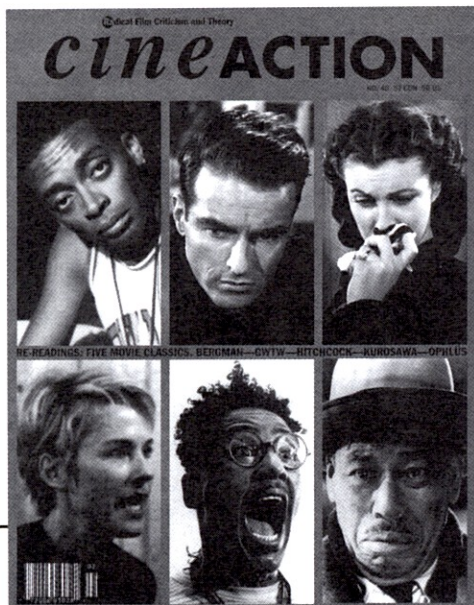
12. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

cineACTION

BACK ISSUES

1. Neglected Films of the 80's
2. Women in Contemporary Hollywood
- 3/4 Reading the Text (*double issue*)
5. Alternative Cinema
8. Revaluation
9. Comedy
12. Teen Films
- 13/14 Film Noir (*double issue*)
- 15 Interpretation
- 16 Canadian Cinema
- 17 Re:Positioning
- 18 Imperialism and Film
- 19/20 Critical Issues (*double issue*)
- 21/22 Rethinking Authorship (*double*)
- 23 Documentary: Theory and Politics
- 24/25 Feminist Film Theory/Criticism (*double*)
- 26/27 Melodrama and the Female Star (*double*)
- 28 Canadas: Cinema and Criticism
- 29 Revaluation: Hollywood
- 30 Framing the Family
- 31 Narrative and Film
- 33 Screening the New World Order
- 34 Modernism
- 35 Gays and Hollywood, Queer Cinema
- 36 Toronto International Film Festival Reviews
- 37 Movements, History and Filmmaking
- 38 Murder in America
- 39 Contemporary World Cinemas
- 40 Re-Readings and a Spike Lee Dossier
- 41 Style

To order back issues, use the card inserted in this issue.



parallel the dead bodies of Fouchon's victims cast away like garbage after their purpose is over. The warehouse environment metaphorically represents Woo's additional employment of motifs from *The Most Dangerous Game*. Gigantic masks (one of which is a huge skull paralleling the small skull seen earlier in Randall Poe's goldfish bowl) figure prominently among the discarded items. They represent cast-away items of a consumer-oriented, throw-away economy annually celebrated in a carnival now little better than a mob-infested drunken binge in one of America's most violent cities. Facing Fouchon in their last encounter, Chance humorously responds to his adversary's question as to his involvement in Natasha's cause, "Poor people get bored too." It also represents the perspective of exploited homeless people who will eventually turn against their oppressors and move towards a better tomorrow.

Despite its flaws, *Hard Target* is far superior to *Broken Arrow*. It suggests one creative path John Woo might follow and develop in his tortuous negotiations with the Hollywood film industry. *Hard Target* updates *The Most Dangerous Game* with new associations highlighting the precarious situation affecting everyone existing in a post capitalist apocalyptic crisis situation. Woo attempted to combat the type of action movie Hollywood audiences are "taught to enjoy," a strategy he failed to achieve in *Broken Arrow*. Although unsuccessful in gaining control of *Hard Target's* final cut, Woo's intentions still remain in the film. In both the original and later-modified credit sequence, the camera tracks into the face of Pick Van Cleef. He looks directly at the audience. The Universal and Japanese theatrical release versions insert the image of Fouchon returning Pick's gaze in a traditional Hollywood shot-reverse-shot classical manner. The gaze becomes conveniently sutured into the narrative. However, Woo originally shot the scene so that no fictional character alleviates audience anxieties by responding to the gaze of a character looking *directly* at us.¹³ The next scene is a long-shot of Fouchon's "dogs" riding on their motor bikes in pursuit of Binder. Woo originally broke the rules of classical Hollywood cinema by putting audiences under the interrogating gaze of a character. By so doing, he challenges our involvement in a cinematically manufactured *Most Dangerous Game* bloodbath and asks us to choose between complicity with the image or interrogation of its social consequences. For all its faults, *Hard Target* suggests a path Woo could follow if the present Hollywood system allows him to.

I wish to dedicate this article to three people most influential in revealing to me another cinematic world replacing the vacuum left by the death of Hollywood—Tom Weisser, Todd Tjersland, and Joe Ragus.

13 Ivan Muricy has commented on Woo's development of Eisenstein's editing techniques, seeing them as evidence of a deliberate strategy in undermining and delaying the process of classical Hollywood linear time techniques. (He has also suggested that Woo and Travolta decided to treat *Broken Arrow* as a joke with director allowing star to overact similar to Scorsese and DeNiro's attitude to *Cape Fear*). In *The Killer*, Woo had broken classical editing rules of "crossing the line" in a scene between Danny Lee and Chow Yun-Fat. In his audio-commentary to the Criterion laserdisc version, Woo points out his breach of the rules intended to reveal both figures as mirror images of each other.

by Patrick Tan

East/West Politics

**The east is east and west is west
and ne'er the twain shall meet.**

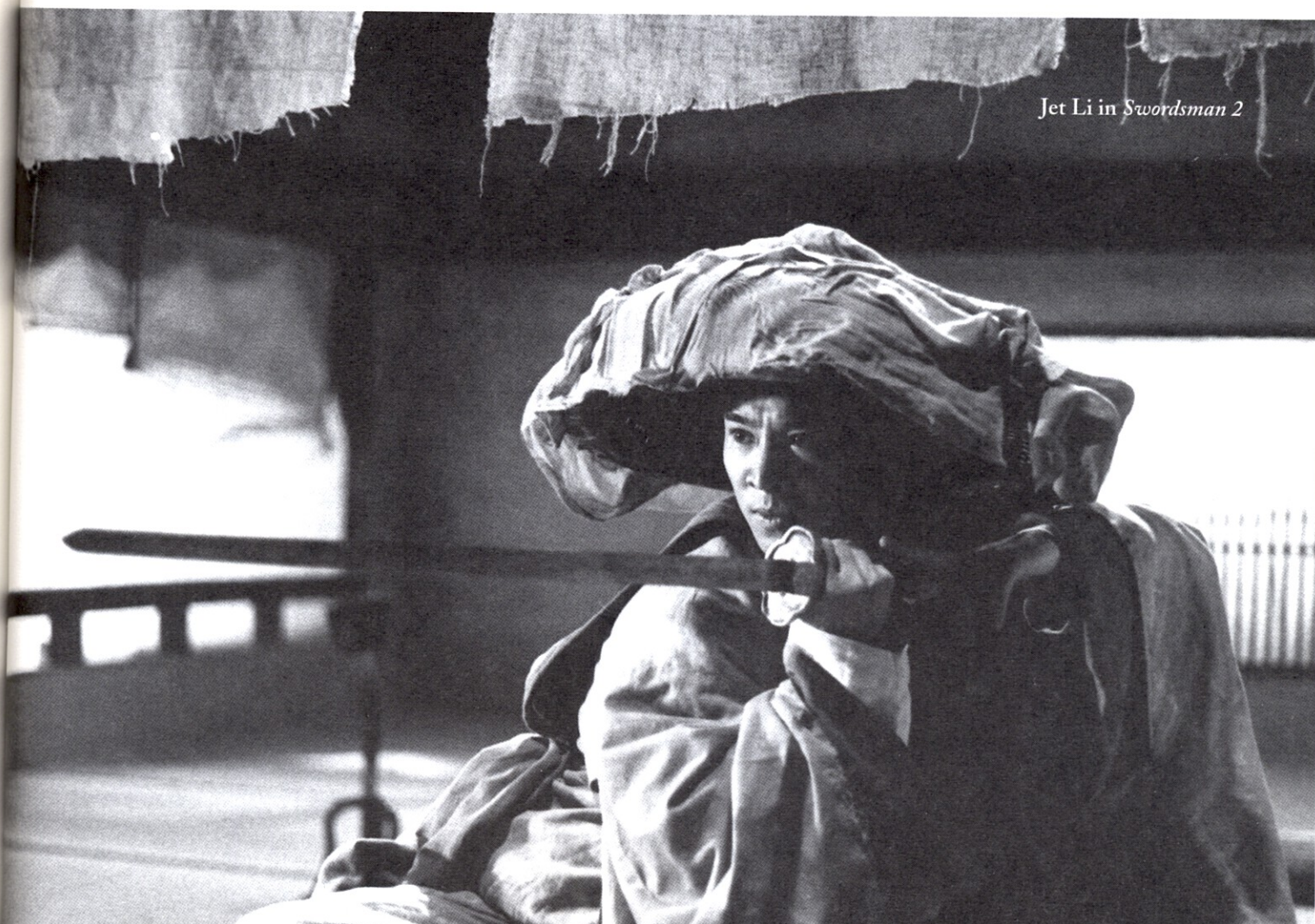
THE ADVENT OF RECENT INTEREST IN THE BUDDING FILM industry that is Hong Kong's would seem to prove this old adage false. In recent years, Hong Kong filmmakers and stars alike have been flocking in droves to the West. The catalyst that precipitated the need for this mass migration is, of course, the ever looming June 30, 1997. What is most surprising, however, is the fact that so many have made so clean a transition.

Both John Woo (*Hard Target*, *Broken Arrow*) and Ringo Lam (*Maximum Risk*) have met with fairly optimistic successes in their first ventures in the US. This happened despite the trepidation of many a film critic who took to chanting Fritz Lang's name like a Buddhist mantra. Even the inimitable Jackie Chan went far beyond all expectations when his

American debut, *Rumble in the Bronx*, became a box office hit. So, the question is, are all these sure proof that the language of cinema is cross-cultural? If so, then perhaps this amalgamation of Eastern and Western sensibilities has produced a common expression of Jung's collective unconscious. Western literature traditionally and stereotypically imbued oriental culture with a sense of mystical inscrutability. However, with the Global Village scenario fast becoming a reality, it would seem that the two cultures have found a common ground. And film, being a product of modern technology, would be well deserving of its place as the instrument of expression of this new global psyche.

Before the 1980s, the fledgling Hong Kong film industry consisted of mostly low budget period films, contemporary

Jet Li in *Swordsman 2*





Jackie Cheung in *Ashes of Time*

dramas and slapstick comedies. As the medium matured stylistically, the industry began to gain Western critical recognition. This was partly due the international successes of Mainland Chinese directors such as Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*) and Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*) to name a few. However, I will focus my attention on the more commercial Hong Kong film industry for reasons that will later be made clear.

The two men responsible for first attracting international attention are John Woo (*A Better Tomorrow*, 1986; *The Killer*, 1989) and Tsui Hark (*Once Upon a Time in China*, 1991). This invited a fusillade of film reviews and critical analyses, mostly positive and some negative. However, whilst I appreciate the sudden flurry of attention I find the mostly flagrant misinterpretations to be quite appalling. This misinterpretation stems from the tendency to view all through the prism of occidental philosophy.

Take positive reviews of John Woo films, for example; prevalent phrases include "homoerotic tension", "stylized gangster film" and "ultraviolent arias". Now, to place emphasis on *The Killer's* graphic violence is akin to liking *Raging Bull* solely for the boxing scenes. It is eminently unfair to both the film and its creator to expound on the violence as grounds to dismiss it. To do so would be to miss the forest for the trees.

After all, measures of acceptable violence in film are purely arbitrary and differ between cultures. Similarly, to commend *The Killer* because it portrays graphic violence unavailable in Hollywood films would be to do the film even less justice.

In stylistic terms, *The Killer* owes much to films like Melville's *Le Samourai* and Scorsese's *Mean Streets*. However, thematically, *The Killer* employs motifs of 'honour' and 'friendship' already predominant in Chinese literature. I digress at this point to say that words such as honour and friendship are inadequate expositions of Eastern notions that have an almost ineffable quality in the English language. An old story comes to mind;

A villain holds for ransom a noble swordsman's family. The price, the death of the aforementioned swordsman's best friend/brother. The swordsman, however, kills his only child, his wife and the villain. Then, the swordsman apologizes to his friend for having been put in the position to betray him.

This story is probably fairly misogynistic in Western terms but the theme holds true for much of Chinese and Japanese literature. In this way John Woo films are cinematic retellings of an old idea, clothed in modern raiment and substituting a gun for a sword. An examination of the various films' narratives reveal yet another link to Chinese tradition. *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer*, *Hard-Boiled* (1992) and even *Once a*

Thief (1991) are all stories involving the Triads, hence the reason why many critics have labelled the films as gangster movies. However, this assumption is not entirely accurate.

The Triads bear origins dating back to Ancient China wherein men and women aligned themselves with certain groups of power in the 'martial world' (this is a wholly inadequate phrase that I have taken from the subtitles of *Swordsman 2*. Also I have to apologise for the phrases that I have to use despite the occidental preconceptions that they often carry). Certain codes of conduct and honour then evolved within these 'societies'. Another aspect of this 'martial world' that is prevalent in literature is that the men are also masters of the 'martial arts'; not just 'kung fu' but a powerful form of 'inner force'. Early films often based themselves on historical or fictional accounts of these 'martial artists'. A good example would be the plethora of films and serials based on the exploits of the famous doctor and martial artist, Wong Fei Hong.

In the twentieth century, the Triads have found themselves without a place in modern society. Hence, they have become the hoodlums and the gangsters of today, still existing within the confines of their own codes of honour. *The Killer*, then, is a treatise on the incompatibility of such codes of honour with the carnivorous society of today. Whilst this situation probably bears a strong resemblance to the Italian Mafia, it would be folly to simply assume that they are exactly alike.

Having said that, I can assure Western viewers that Danny Lee had no intention of bedding Chow Yun-fat in *The Killer*. Certainly, homosexuality exists in Eastern society as in any other. However, it exists mostly as a non-issue rather than a topic to cogitate over. If anything, there have been more than a few instances of comic situations with famous actors in drag. Gay jokes have also appeared now and again in slapstick comedies. The reason behind this is not derogatory in nature but simply that overt sexuality (hetero or otherwise) has never been a strong point with the Chinese. A friend once remarked of *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) that only in a Chinese film would a couple spend their final night together writing poetry. No doubt, in an American film they would be composing poetry of a different sort.

On the subject of cross-dressing, Ching Siu Tung's *Swordsman 2* (1992) and *The East is Red* (1993) have often been cited as commentaries on gender roles. Briefly, the narrative of *The Swordsman* and its various sequels revolve around a 'Sacred Scroll' said to contain the secret to mastering the ultimate martial art and hence omnipotent power, the 'catch 22' being that the single prerequisite is castration. The choice of Brigitte Lin to play the man who sacrifices all in the name of power has incited many Western critics to proclaim that the film is a deliberate attempt at redefining gender roles. To paraphrase a reviewer, "the traditional boundaries of appropriateness and gender are exceedingly blurred". This is obviously mental masturbation to the nth degree. It has been a long standing plot device in Chinese fiction that a castrated man can summon up greater reserves of 'inner force'. Apparently, this androgynous form allows him to utilise both the Yin and Yang aspects of nature. For the same reason, eunuchs are often characterised as men of immense power, politically as

well as in the martial arts.

Returning to the point of John Woo films being a throw-back to earlier martial arts movies, a comparison between *The Killer* and *Swordsman 2* can be readily made. In the former, Chow Yun-Fat ruminates on the loss of honour in the 'new' world and decides to retire. In the latter, Jet Li ponders the state of things and decides to 'withdraw' from the martial world. Chow, of course, finally comes head to head with the new order and dies fighting. Li vanquishes the evil that was but is banished at the end. The parallel is exact. There is no doubt that the creators share a common sensibility. Another commonality that Western audiences find hard to swallow is the seemingly blatant excessiveness of the two films. On one hand, Li waves a sword and half a building collapses. On the other, Chow blazes with a semi-automatic and decimates an army of men. Impossible? Totally unbelievable? But, is it more unbelievable than Clint Eastwood gunning down four men at twenty paces or Superman flying to the rescue of Lois Lane. Cinema, by definition, involves the suspension of disbelief. But culture is the ultimate arbiter that assigns to us what is and is not within the realms of reason.

Undeniably, one of the most unfathomable Hong Kong films that Western audiences have been confronted with is Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994). Dense and multi-textured, the film is a challenge to any who have to contend with both the subtitles and the culture gap. However labyrinthine as it may seem, there is a plot at the core of the film which essentially consists of a rumination on the importance of memories. Wong's narrative style is reflective of an oriental philosophy that is largely cyclical in nature. This method of storytelling is not goal-oriented and often cherishes the journey as much as the final destination. In so saying, I believe that it is unjustly said that "plot is never the main point for Wong". On the contrary, Wong is a strongly visual storyteller whose narrative depends as much on what he chooses to show on-screen as well as the emotional response the images invoke. Unfortunately, some of these invocations are culture specific. As a result, *Ashes of Time* may devolve into an interesting but unintelligible barrage of visual stimuli for the occidental viewer.

Finally, I would like to add that the Hong Kong film industry is worthy of notice purely because of its commercial nature. Works of an obscure genius, however brilliant, often pertain to a single individual's view of the world. A brilliant film made in a commercial system is by far more reflective of the vibrant culture from whence it sprung. In addition, if this essay has seemed somewhat critical over many 'occidentals' well intentioned forays into this new cinema, I do apologise. Certainly, I applaud the unrestrained enthusiasm evident thus far. However, a word to the wise;

There is no darkness but in ignorance, in which thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog.

Feste, Twelfth Night

1. Please note that terms such as 'occidental,' oriental etc. are used in their precise dictionary definitions with no implied intent at either alienating or disparaging certain groups. In fact, it is the fervent desire of the author that art forms such as film should work towards bridging the culture gap.

ASIAN AMERICAN FILMMAKERS: THE NEXT GENERATION?

Identity, Mimicry and Transtextuality in Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* and Quentin Lee and Justin Lin's *Shopping for Fangs*

by Edward R. O'Neill

Asian American Filmmakers, Asian American Films?

Films directed by and about Asian Americans have in the last fifteen years become a known commercial commodity and critical quantity, engaging increasingly wide audiences and impelling career trajectories for these same directors which would have been unthinkable even ten years ago. Namely, the "by" and the "about" can now part company, and films by Asian Americans are no longer necessarily also films about Asian Americans.

This separation probably began in 1993, the year Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* was released to wide acclaim; this was also the year for which Variety deemed Ang Lee's U.S.-Taiwanese co-production *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) to be the most commercially successful film, yielding a phenomenal 4,000% return on its initial investment. While Lee's subsequent film, the Taiwan-made *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) remained focused on Asian characters, it nevertheless reinforced the industry image of Lee's talent for depicting intricate cultural rituals. The film was also enough of a critical and commercial success to allow Lee to be chosen by star and writer Emma Thompson to direct her every-award-in-sight-winning adaptation *Sense and Sensibility* (1995). Although Lee says he treated *Sense and Sensibility* as a "foreign film," his ability to stage complex social worlds in an accessible commercial style permitted his move from foreign-language and -themed films to mainstream commercial success—and in the high-brow realm of American Anglophilia no less.¹

Wayne Wang's background and career make for a somewhat more complex case. Wang has alternated between Asian and non-Asian subject matter, and his films have demonstrated a sense of formal complexity that is both artful and playful. Still, this formal complexity is close enough to Hollywood norms to allow Wang an ever-increasing measure of commercial and critical success. After a *succes d'estime* with the low-

Shopping for Fangs



budget (\$22,500) *Chan Is Missing* (1981) and a critical success with *Dim Sum* (1985), made for the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service's American Playhouse, Wang was hired to direct the commercially unsuccessful non-Asian *Slamdance* (1987). Wang returned to Asian characters in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989) and also in the more experimental *Life Is Cheap...* (1990), but it was the success of Wang's complex neo-Mankiewiczian *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) which set the stage for his most recent work, the joined-at-the-hip films *Smoke* (1995) and *Blue in the Face* (1995).

With these last two films, Wang returned to non-Asian characters, but with greater critical and commercial success than in *Slamdance*. Wang was also able to divide his split artistic personality between the two films, putting a commercially appealing kind of formalism into the former, while enjoying greater improvisational freedom in the latter less-expensive

film, which was filmed on the set of the former. This split personality is in turn reflected by critical responses to Wang's work, which will identify Wang either as a Hollywood classicist or a European-style auteur: for one French critic, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* isn't just about a love between two Chinese immigrants but also equally about Wang's love affair with Hollywood cinema,² while on this side of the Atlantic another writer has paid Wang the "compliment" of comparing *Smoke* to Pasolini's *Mama Roma*—as if this comparison raises Wang up to the level of a European "artist."³

If directors like Ang Lee and Wayne Wang can "cross over" to white mainstream films, it is in part because their techniques are not so far removed from a norm of Hollywood acceptability, and so critics can congratulate them for their assimilation into whatever tradition—Hollywood or European—the writer values. Whatever experimentation Wang may employ, he is still able to accommodate himself easily into commercial filmmaking when he needs to. Quite a different case is that of the Asian American Gregg Araki—the drop-dead gorgeous poster-boy for American independent filmmaking. After a series of micro-budget (\$5,000) films marked by Godard's influence, Araki continued in a similar

vein with queer-themed *The Living End* and *Totally F***ed Up*. These latter two films allowed Araki to be identified by the American press (ever eager to detect new "movements") as a member of the queer new wave, the members of whom, if they have anything in common, can probably be distinguished in part by a somewhat higher degree of interest in formal innovation than other minority filmmaking trends—the three stories in three styles in Todd Haynes' perhaps overly-brilliant film *Poison* comes to mind.⁴

Just as Cassavetes on a bigger budget (as in *Gloria*) turns out to be a classical visual stylist of great beauty, so Araki's most recent film, made with the kind of European financing which was so crucial to the career of David Lynch, is an *exercice du style*—and arguably the most stylistically accomplished

1. See *Sight and Sound* Vol. 6, No. 3 (March 1996), p. 24.

2. See Joël Magny, "My Darling Mei Oi," in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 427, pp. 64-65.

3. *The Hudson Review*, v. 49, No. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 286-293. Further, Wang had already made a stab at joining this particular club by appropriating the music from Joseph Losey's *The Go-Between* for his *Chan Is Missing* but without identifying or acknowledging either Losey or the composer Michel Legrand.

4. See Kimberly Yutani's astute "Gregg Araki and the Queer New Wave" in *Amerasia Journal* 20:1 (1994), pp. 85-91.





independent film to gain release in 1995. (Scratch an avant-garde filmmaker—and you find Vincent Minelli.)⁵ With its black-and-white checked hotel rooms, talking amputated heads, alternately playful and menacing sexuality, and over-the-top horror moments, *The Doom Generation* explores stylistic possibilities unlike those of any other Asian American filmmaker—until recently. Yet somehow critics have taken less kindly to Araki than to Wang: one French writer opines that Araki is a frozen-food version of Lynch and Tarantino, apparently basing this notion on the idea that Rose McGowan's blunt-cut black bob haircut in *The Doom Generation* is based on Uma Thurman's in *Pulp Fiction* (1994).⁶ Somehow Tarantino is credited with being able to pay homage to Jean-Luc Godard's former wife Anna Karina, whereas Araki must merely be miming the image at one degree of remove. One can only wonder why Araki isn't assumed to be capable of quoting Godard's films for himself, since the critic never explains his reasoning.⁷

But just as Ang Lee's *A Wedding Banquet* is almost never considered part of the "Queer New Wave" despite its gay subject matter and probably also because of its stylistic timidity, so

conversely Araki is almost never identified specifically as Asian American, never grouped, that is, with Wang and Lee. Although Araki considers himself to be doubly minoritized (as gay and Asian American), it's the sexuality part of the equation that has had a greater significance for the public.⁸ It's as if filmmakers are only allowed one minority status per person. In Araki's case, it's easy to see why Araki isn't grouped with Wang and Lee: despite having groomed his own Asian-American Southern California-version of Joe Dallessandro, James Duval, Asian identity is not explicitly thematized within Araki's work. As Araki himself once said, his films are not about "families eating rice."⁹

Asian American Film: The Next Generation

But the very lack of focus on Asian American identity as a topic, together with his stylistic energies and hipster ethos, arguably make Araki's films more representative of an emerging generation of Asian Americans and thus indicative too of up-and-coming Asian American filmmakers. This generation may be born in North America (like Araki) or Asian-born, but they are often further removed from Asian languages or more

immersed in English. They do not necessarily grow up speaking the language of their parents or may speak but not read it. Their knowledge of their parents' customs may be no more than rote and cursory, as religious practices often are for assimilated Jews. They do not necessarily think of themselves as "different" from other North Americans, or they may not want to, and so their identity may not be an explicit topic of reflection, and yet for all that this identity is not simply nonexistent: after all, to ignore something still requires some recognition, however hidden, of what one is ignoring.

Two recent films, one released in 1995 and the other not yet released but currently making the rounds on the festival circuits, seem to speak from this position. Moreover, like Araki's work, these films show a far greater interest in the language of cinema as something other than a transparent medium for emotional storytelling like the films of Ang Lee and (to a lesser extent) Wayne Wang. And, like Araki's quotation in *The Doom Generation* of other texts, from slasher horror films to Anna Karina's haircut, these films need to be understood not just in terms of the stories they tell and the forms they use, but also in terms of the pretexts on which they're playing. Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1995) and Quentin Lee and Justin Lin's *Shopping for Fangs* (1997) may mark the beginning of a "second generation" of Asian American filmmakers. All three are Asian-born and raised in America, Canada or both. Shum was born in Hong Kong and raised in Canada. Lee, also born in Hong Kong, moved to Montreal before receiving his education in the U.S. Lin moved from Taipei to Southern California's notoriously conservative (and mostly white) Orange County at the age of ten, eventually becoming an eagle scout and working his way through the California University system to UCLA Film School.

All three come by their experimental tendencies naturally, albeit from widely different directions. Mina Shum's background is in theater, and she repeatedly returns to theatrical devices like direct address and even to theatrical texts in *Double Happiness*. After his stints first at Berkeley and then at Yale's English department (arguably the place where French deconstruction first touched down in America), Quentin Lee spent some time as a queer experimental video "bad boy," and his early films are more likely to quote *Un Chien andalou* than they are to tell a narrative, narrative being a recent interest for Lee. Justin Lin's earlier short films are carefully balanced between an emphasis on film as a formal medium and an interest in economical storytelling motivated by classical

5. And the opposite may be true as well: scratch Vincent Minelli, and you find an avant-garde filmmaker. This is as much a comment about who Vincent Minelli is as a comment about who avant-garde filmmakers are.

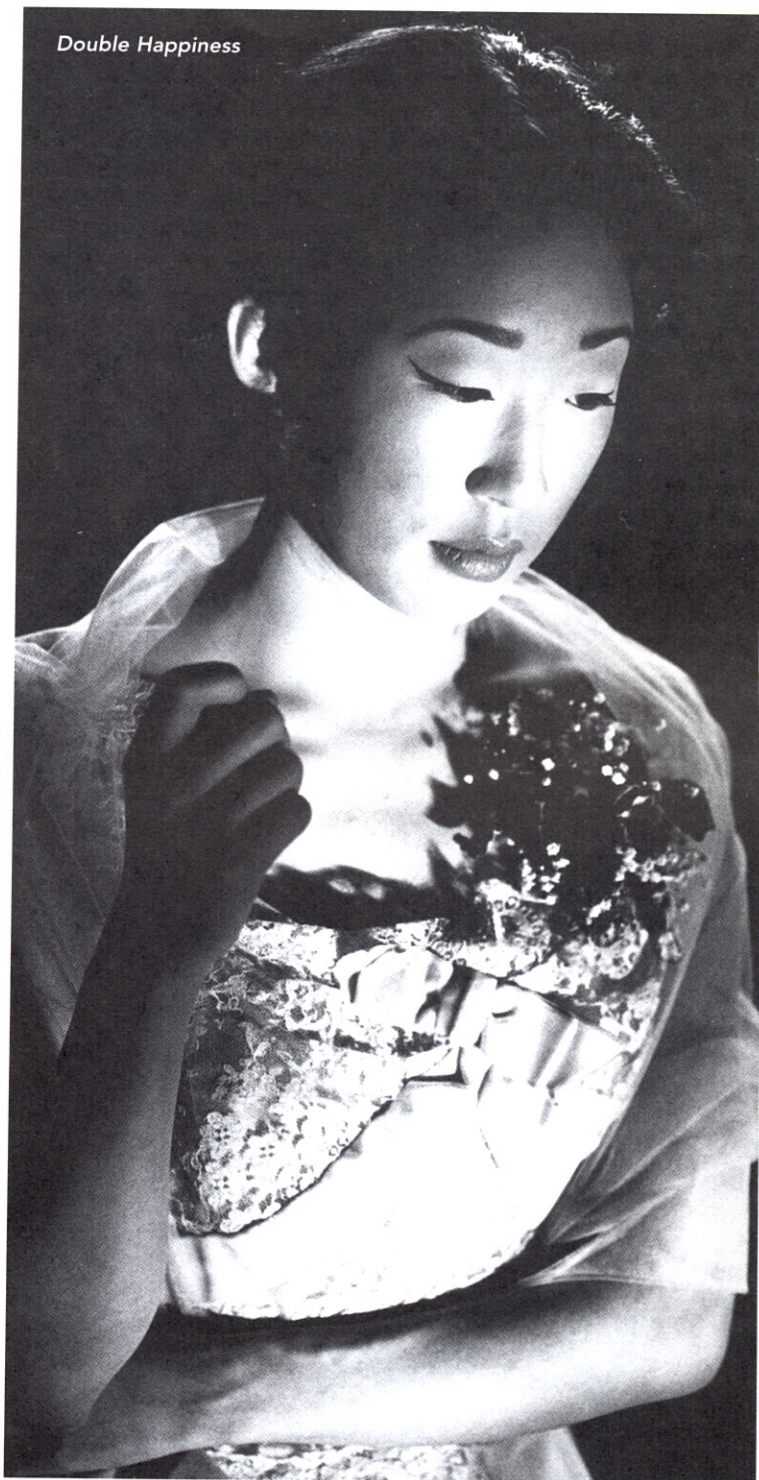
6. Jean-Loup Bourget, "The Doom Generation," *Positif*, Nov. 1995, p. 44.

7. *The Doom Generation* was shot before *Pulp Fiction* was released.

8. Ang Lee's status as a married man may also exclude him from consideration for membership in the Queer New Wave, since this membership seems to turn not only on thematic considerations but on the lifestyle of the directors who make up the group. If Araki follows through with his recent statements that homosexuality has become passé and, as rumors have it, is having an affair with a woman, one wonders what will happen to his status as a member of the Queer New Wave. From once having declared himself "doubly minoritized," Araki may end up with no minority status at all.

9. Araki made this remark after a screening of *The Doom Generation* at USC in the fall of 1995.

Double Happiness



Double Happiness



Hollywood virtues, while they also range over every stylistic possibility, from neorealism in *Fish and Chips* to heavy-duty montage in *Come Fly with Me* (1995).¹⁰ Lee and Lin met at UCLA Film School, and they collaborated on *Shopping for Fangs*, which Lee produced, each writing and directing half of the film's sequences.

But these are the first narrative features for all three filmmakers,¹¹ and for these reasons, together with others which I'll explore in what follows, these two films make for an interesting case study in how an emphasis upon film as a medium, including various forms of reflexivity, can be integrated with narrative feature film, and how younger filmmakers are rethinking the way they'd like to address issues of ethnicity and identity. Taken together, the two works give important clues about the future of Asian American filmmaking in North America and the current state of the how people are experiencing identity and its cultural politics.

Playing with Style

The opening of Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* presents a good example of the way self-conscious stylistic experimentation becomes a means for exploring questions of ethnicity and identity. After the actress Sandra Oh announces the scene and take number and operates the clapperboard, she addresses the camera directly in the persona of her character Jade Li. Jade asks us to take her family as "normal," or at least as "white," and we cut from this direct address to the family bickering, the parents mostly in Chinese and the children in English, about

what Jade's sister Pearl (Frances You) calls the "fact" that Jade is unlikely to be married if she doesn't find a husband soon. The humor arises in part through the way the father thinks the word "fact" is something obscene, and also from the way the camera is positioned on a lazy susan which spins with the food as the family members serve themselves by reaching towards the camera. Shum said she conceived this scene (and others) in "large, geometric shapes," no doubt much like the animated credits which follow after the character of Jade returns and reminds us (and herself) that "the Brady Bunch never needed subtitles..."¹²

A lot about the film is laid out in these few moments. The presence of the clapperboard, Jade's direct address to the camera, her appeal to the audience, and the camera's elaborate spinning movement quickly tell us that although the character desires the audience to consider her family as typical, normal or "white," the film will be anything but normal in its style. Not only does the character of Jade break the fourth wall and address the camera directly, but the insertion of the camera within the scene allows all the characters to do so too, if not quite so blatantly. However familiar the terrain, the film will continue to be audaciously theatrical in its breaching of cinematic conventions.

This familiar terrain itself is, more specifically, a familial terrain, one in which cultural conflicts are mapped onto generational conflicts, and everything works itself around the dinner table and within the context of the family. The terrain is, of course, melodrama, and whatever questions about cultural

identity Shum's film poses are played out as questions about sex and marriage, being single and being a family member—the “fact” that the older daughter should be “fucked,” but only under the guise of marriage to that ever-elusive “nice Chinese boy” of whom her parents dream. In this first family scene, Shum squeezes it all into the smallest of packages, and one can't help but admire her economy: the language divides the characters between the Chinese-speaking parents (Alannah Ong and Stephen Chang) and the English-speaking youth, and the misrecognition of the word “fact” for what Pearl calls “the other word”—the never articulated homophone “fucked”—provides a “slip of the ear” which allows the central topics of the film—sexual intercourse and/as reproduction of the family unit—to be articulated and evaded at the same time.

Indeed, both *Double Happiness* and *Shopping for Fangs* are eager to deal with sexuality in terms which have little to do with the familial structures clearly weighing upon Jade in this opening scene. Both films have gay characters: Jade goes on a sham date to please her parents with the perfect, gorgeous, black-Jeep-driving Andrew (Johnny Mah), and *Shopping for Fangs* gives us a gay photographer named Clarence (John Cho) who has stayed in America after college and found himself far from China with no papers. Both films portray one-night stands in ways that are frankly erotic: Jade sleeps with the nerdy bespectacled white grad student Mark (Callum Rennie) only to desert him the next morning; and Phil's one-night stand with a beautiful blonde in *Shopping for Fangs* is an intensely erotic series of sexual positions rapidly intercut with darkness—not unlike the use of tableaux vivantes to portray a sexual encounter in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). Indeed, the sign of growth for the gay photographer Clarence is that he stops mourning the end of his long-term long-distance relationship with a boyfriend who's returned to China and accepts what he knows will be a one-night stand with a British Asian man. It is hard to imagine this attitude towards one-night stands in, for instance, *Dim Sum*: the two films in question aim to reconstruct Asian American identity, moving it away from the family and towards the individual. At the end of *Double Happiness*, Jade lives alone and calls Mark, whom she'd earlier dumped, but this is a faint and tentative sign of a couple's establishment, and at the end of *Shopping for Fangs*, when two of the main characters meet by chance and drive off, one has no sense of them as a romantic couple, but rather as two individuals who wander together.¹³

Yet in other ways the two films are widely divergent. Lee and Lin's film, for instance, completely avoids any direct statements about Asian American identity, while it also avoids any language but English. The audacity of *Shopping for Fangs* is less in its use of formal markers to key the directors' identity and more in the appropriation of generic markers by which the film puts Asian American characters in narrative and dramatic contexts familiar from Hollywood cinema: when Phil, the young Asian accounting clerk, comes down with a bad case of werewolfism, both he and the film he's living in have appropriated identities styled by Hollywood cinema. Here the comparison to *Double Happiness* is revealing. The relation between

the film's characters and the film itself, between what's “inside” the film and what's “outside” it, becomes fluid, indeed homologous: if the character of Phil becomes a werewolf, then the film we're watching becomes a werewolf movie, and the two levels of mimicry bleed into one another. Shum's film theatrically transgresses borderlines: the use of a clapperboard bearing Shum's own name in the very first shot of the film is emblematic. But the borderline thus transgressed is nevertheless one that is clearly demarcated and thus in a sense unchallenged: it is the character who addresses us, even as the actress holds the clapperboard, a clapperboard which disappears after the film's beginning.

Formal Devices in *Double Happiness*

One of the engaging and refreshing aspects of *Double Happiness* is the way it mobilizes a series of strong formal devices in order to present vividly and theatrically each of the characters, but especially in order to create the subjectivity of the central character of Jade, as well as to mark Shum's directorial presence. Although the clapperboard of the film's first shot never reappears, Jade's direct address at the film's outset nevertheless prepares for a series of scenes in which each family member in turn (save for the absent and never-seen ostracized brother Winston) addresses the camera directly, each situated against a different painterly backdrop. Each shares thoughts and feelings not voiced within the narrative space of the rest of the film—which centers on the family home. But it's Jade as aspiring actress who gets the star treatment: when she acts out being Blanche Dubois and St. Joan alone in the room she shares with her younger sister Pearl, Shum changes the scenery, costume, lights and even sound to create Jade's imagined—and borrowed—reality, so as to buffer Jade from the rest of the narrative. As when she transgresses the limits of naturalistic cinematic conventions by showing the actress operating the clapperboard, Shum creates Jade's imaginative universe so that she can then breach the borderlines by having Jade drop out of character and the flames under her St. Joan die down as Jade is called to the phone by her father.

The film's other stylistic devices often serve a similar purpose—bringing us into Jade's world. Shum uses slow motion repeatedly, often, though not always, in order to demarcate Jade's subjective experience. When Jade enters a room at an extended-family gathering, we see her approach some female relatives in slow motion, and Jade's view of them is similarly slowed down. This device is likely to be combined with music which synchronizes the characters' slowed-down motions—as when Jade leaves on her “date” with Andrew. But such stylization is not usually strictly subjective: when Jade's one-night stand Mark finds her killing time by swinging on a swingset,

11. Quentin Lee's 90-minute long film *Flow* combined his earlier, short films into a kind of narrative about a filmmaker and his films, but the work was not originally conceived and shot as a single film.

12. See Shum's statement on the *Double Happiness* web site maintained by the distributor, New Line.

13. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Madeline/Judy says that only one person can wander, since two together are always going somewhere, but Scottie disagrees. I think this penultimate image of *Shopping for Fangs* is an homage to *Vertigo*'s image of two people wandering together but not as a couple, together but alone.

she's swinging in slow motion up into the frame when Mark pops into view on the swing next to her, each taking turns occupying the frame. The hip and moody lightweight reverb guitar pop music of Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet (who supplied music for the Kids in the Hall TV show) underlines this and other similar moments, music and slow motion often combining to create transitional set-pieces which move the story along, the story being essentially that of a central character and her development towards autonomy and away from her family.

What's not in *Shopping for Fangs*

The first thing one notices about *Shopping for Fangs* is what's not there. Namely, there is a pleasant lack of wailing and gnashing of teeth about Old World vs. New, tradition vs. assimilation, and all those hallmarks of films about immigrant cultures at least since *The Jazz Singer*. None of the fine actors in *Shopping for Fangs* are burdened with being forced to say things like "We're not Asian and we're not American—what are we?" Here the film veers away from the left-leaning socially meaningful dramas which descend from Miller and Inge, or from the Hollywood social problem film or the more explicit of the Angry Young Man films: *Shopping for Fangs* is thankfully more influenced by Roger Corman than by Stanley

Kramer. The twenty-something characters of *Shopping* are rather immersed in their own world, one which can be mostly Asian American and one in which it is unnecessary to reflect on what their culture is, for better or worse. This does not mean that the film has nothing to say about Asian American identity, but rather, as I'll try to show, that it says it through different means.

Another thing which sets *Shopping for Fangs* apart from *Double Happiness* is that the former film is post-*Pulp Fiction*. Although *portmanteau* films or films with multiple characters whose paths cross are far from new, these narrative structures have been given a new caché by Tarantino's use of them. *Shopping for Fangs* opens by introducing its three main characters Trinh, Phil and Katherine, each by name. Quentin Lee directed the segments dealing with Trinh and Katherine, while Justin Lin directed Phil's story. Trinh wears a blonde wig, thrift store dresses and dark glasses (even at night), as when we first see her interrupting an alleyway rape with her chrome-plated revolver and then cheerily serving coffee at a diner the next day. We see Phil (Radmar Jao) before his bathroom mirror yanking out an extraneous facial hair, then ineptly trying to make a date with a pretty young secretary in the Kafkaesque corporation where he's an accounting clerk. And Katherine

Shopping for Fangs



(Jeanne Chin) is a monotone-voiced housewife who explains her blackouts, such as the one where she loses her wallet, pager and cellular phone, to her psychiatrist. What Katherine doesn't see, but we do, is that Trinh has found Katherine's purse and forms a lesbian crush on her, which Trinh confesses to Clarence, the young gay photographer who is a habitué at the diner where she works. With this the film is off and running. Katherine explores herself and her past, while pursued by an incomprehending muscular husband who's also Phil's boss (Clint Jung), while Trinh pursues Katherine and nurtures her asexual friendship with Clarence, and Phil comes to find that his extraneous hair is part of a much larger problem, which is twofold: not only is he a werewolf, but he can't get a date to save his life. In none of this does anyone mention that all of these main characters are Asian American.

Bildung Under (De)Construction

Also missing from *Shopping for Fangs* are scenes of families having elaborate meals, parents bemoaning the waning of the power of cultural traditions on their children and in general, as Gregg Araki would have it, "people eating rice." If the sometime-werewolf Phil and his sister Naomi take turns striking paternalistic attitudes towards each other, they also bridle at this unwanted supervision. These are characters who don't even want the hint that they're someone's child, that they're anything but autonomous adults. Whereas *Double Happiness* is very much a narrative of *bildung*, of Jade's formation and growth towards independence, the characters in *Shopping for Fangs* are already independent, and yet this independence is not treated as a virtue in and of itself but rather as a site of ambivalence. The fact that to be autonomous is itself a sign of a dependence upon cultural mechanisms other than the family—such as the media—will be one of the points we glean from the film.

Indeed, if *Double Happiness* seems to narrate Jade's psychological development, the story *Shopping for Fangs* tells about identity is considerably more psychopathological than developmental. Far from being formed, everyone's in the process of being deformed. Each character in the latter film has some obsession or *idée fixe*: although his doctor slyly suggests that he "release a little tension," Phil believes instead that he's a werewolf; Trinh has a crush on Katherine, whom she's never met but to whom she sends flowers and photo's, and Katherine has blackouts to go along with her Gothic life, in which madness lurks inside an image of domestic "perfection."

Here *Shopping for Fangs* investigates the particular stumbling blocks that gender identities pose for Asian Americans, and the film puts equal emphasis on the precarious situations of both men and women. On the one hand, Phil's problems with body hair not only recapitulate adolescence in a highly aggravated form, these problems also seem to imply the infamous difficulty of reconciling Asian American identity and masculinity.¹⁴ On the other hand, Trinh and Katherine present opposite strategies for being an Asian woman: Katherine's all traditional submission, albeit within a completely whitebread image of upper middle class 'security,' while Trinh has upended every stereotype of femininity in order to make herself

into a parabolic gun-wielding lipstick lesbian. True to the Gothic sources of the story, Katherine's "illness" can ultimately be traced to her husband: he gets worse as she gets better, since her illness was predicated on the illusion of his health, and when that illusion crumbles, she can begin her cure.

Playing the Identity Game

In lieu of parents, the role of investing in Asian cultural values (or Asian culture as a value) is taken up by whites who fetishize an authentic otherness in which the film is loath to believe. Phil's sister's gringo boyfriend (Scott Eberlein) knows the name of the Asian dish that she prepares, whereas Phil does not, and Phil's wry astonishment that his sister even knows how to make the dish speak volumes about these characters' relation to tradition without over-underlining. The same observation about white investment in the Asian's otherness appears in *Double Happiness*: Jade's friend Lisa's boyfriend has an apartment decorated with paper lanterns ("... [S]ale... at K-Mart?" Jade quips) and a fridge filled with imported Chinese beer. In both films, this reversal is an object of humor but not a point for doleful complaints by elders. Rather, it's the younger generation who recognize something the parents in *Double Happiness* don't even observe: their own "authenticity" has become an object of desire in the culture which the parents seek to keep at bay and into which they would have their children assimilate.

Such moments are crucial indices of a complex on-going process of reflection between self and other in which one's self becomes what the other takes one to be. Given Shum's theatrical background and given also that the central character Jade in *Double Happiness* is an aspiring actress, it is not surprising that the film includes an intense consciousness about roles and role-play. What is interesting is how far this conception of performance extends into ethnic identity. When Jade first meets her love-interest, the nerdy whiteboy Mark, she avoids talking to him (and slyly prepares to humiliate him and gain the upper hand) by impersonating a sweet Asian girl with poor English-language skills. Sandra Oh's performance here as Jade is a wickedly funny spoof on cultural stereotypes—she covers her mouth with her hand, giggling, nodding shyly and making brief and soft staccato sounds. When Jade reveals her perfect grasp of English, she can taunt Mark by mimicking the absurd gesticulations he had used in trying to communicate with her impersonation of giggling incomprehension.

In this scene, Jade performs her assigned ethnic and gender role so that she can destroy that role by revealing it to have been a performance, a stereotype mimicked in advance of the other's expectations. Cultural identity here becomes part of a complex, strategic interaction ritual in which each player anticipates the other's expectation so that it can be acted out as a bluff and as bait for a trap. As in the famous Freudian joke about the Jew who expects his interlocutor to lie and thus

14. In "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," Richard Fung analyzes some of the ways in which clichés of Asian masculinity (or the lack thereof) structure gay male pornographic videos involving Asian men. *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991).

experiences that interlocutor's honesty as a refined form of lying, the "truth" of identity in this form of cultural interaction dissolves in a strategic game of bluff and counter-bluff. Much of *Double Happiness* could be understood as a series of similar masquerades. Looking in the mirror before her date with the handsome and eligible Andrew, Jade sees herself as her mother has dressed and coifed her and says despairingly, "I look like Connie Chung." The date turns out to be a sham, a performance of a date, since Andrew turns out to be gay but not out of the closet to his family. Not only does the date become a charade of heterosexual courtship, but Jade helps cover for Andrew by enacting a hilarious scam on the mother: she says, with subdued horror, that she won't be having another date with Andrew because—gulp—he made her pick up the check! Jade's performance of a frustrated heterosexual is carefully juxtaposed with Andrew's similar feigning: both knowingly manipulate their families' expectations of them.

Examples could be multiplied at length.¹⁵ The point is that everyone in *Double Happiness* is impersonating someone or something for some audience, and identity is figured not only as a performance, but as a strategic one. Further, these tricky moves are equally likely to backfire and to trick those, like Jade, who try to profit by them. Jade's family has her watch the local Asian newscaster—the very pinnacle of minority integration and visibility. It is alright, Jade's family thinks, and even admirable, to be visibly different, as long as one is audibly indistinguishable from a white cultural norm. They would like Jade to remodel herself in the acoustic image of the mainstream, and so the minority newscaster as a spectacle of assimilation becomes the only form of show business Jade's family will tolerate—in part because it signifies economic success. But this split between visual and auditory appearance can run in multiple directions. Later this same figure of the accent-less Asian English-speaker reappears not as an ideal model but as a textual trick: when an accentless female voice answers the phone at the apartment of the Li family's disinherited only son Winston, Mrs. Li (Alannah Ong) assumes, much to her horror, that her estranged son's live-in girlfriend is white. But Shum cannily shows us what Mrs. Li can't see: that Winston's lover is Asian but neither sounds nor speaks Cantonese.

Jade is thus constructed both through her proximity to an auditory simulation of the "whiteness" which she asks us to grant her family at the film's outset and also through her distance from an immersion in her parent's Cantonese language. Together, these define Jade's neither-nor position between the rock of assimilation and the hard place of otherness. While looking Asian is alright for those who sound "white," even this separation also poses a problem: when, early on in the film, Jade is asked to read her tiny part with an accent, she volunteers a French accent, only to realize, to her humiliation, that it is of course a "Chinese" accent that's expected of her. Here because Jade looks Asian, she's expected to sound it, too. Likewise, Jade is positioned by the film on the wrong side of the barrier between spoken and written Chinese: towards the film's end, she fails at an audition for a far bigger part because, although she can speak some Cantonese, she cannot read it. In these ways, Shum continually structures her text around these dis-

crepancies between acoustic and visible differences, and so reconstructs Asian ethnic identity as a series of differences, each of which can be treacherous and is potentially unstable.

Ethnicity and/as Masquerade

But while in many ways language—reading, speaking, understanding—is in many ways the key figure for identity in *Double Happiness*, the film also explores an understanding of identity in terms of images and the corresponding performance of an image in mimicry or masquerade—as in Jade's performance of giggling incomprehension before her future lover Mark—and this figuration of identity which is even more central in *Shopping for Fangs*. Such mimicry and masquerade were already at play in Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* when the young cabbie Steve (Marc Hayashi) improvises a series of imitations of various black and Chicano styles of hip street language.¹⁶ Lee and Lin are like this character: talented and street-wise youngsters slyly appropriating hip and urbane signifiers of hipness and urbanity. If all the characters in *Shopping for Fangs* are attempting to escape an image of Asian identity predicated on a lack of aggressivity, the film's title acutely figures the process of acquiring an identity in terms of an act of consumption (i.e., shopping) and in terms of a film genre (i.e., fangs). This titular figure thus gives us access to the central problematic of the film: that of acquiring an identity in a marketplace populated by images which structure our self-image. This process of finding an image to which one can conform oneself is made all the more complex by the kinds of strategic considerations in intercultural dynamics which are so clearly exposed in *Double Happiness*: namely, to what extent is my image of myself determined by the other's image of me, and what is my relationship to that other's image of myself, especially when the other sees me as Other?

Here *Shopping for Fangs* and *Double Happiness* are illuminating when read in the context of writing on that topic: Frantz Fanon's analysis of the way mimicry and masquerade structure identity in the framework of colonialism, as well as more recent writings such as those of Judith Butler and Mary Ann Doane which understand gender and sexuality in these terms, as well as in terms of the category of performativity.¹⁷ Here it is notable that both Fanon and Lacan drew upon both Freud and Sartre as sources, since the intersection of psychoanalysis and Sartrean phenomenology is exactly the logical place where one would expect an analysis not only, on the psychoanalytic side, of the role of the image in the formation of the self but, on the Sartrean side, of the way these images are experienced affectively and of their political valences.

In many ways, one of Justin Lin's earliest films already emblemizes with admirable economy this play of self and other and its attendant anxieties about assimilation. In his award-winning non-synch short *Soybean Milk* (1994), the central character is a nameless Chinese streetsweeper. He works in a big city's Chinatown where he's constantly getting in the way as people take tourist snapshots of themselves in front of carefully-arranged spectacles of Sinicity. He tries to learn English by tape while surrounding himself with mass cultural images of Anglos: these images even surround the

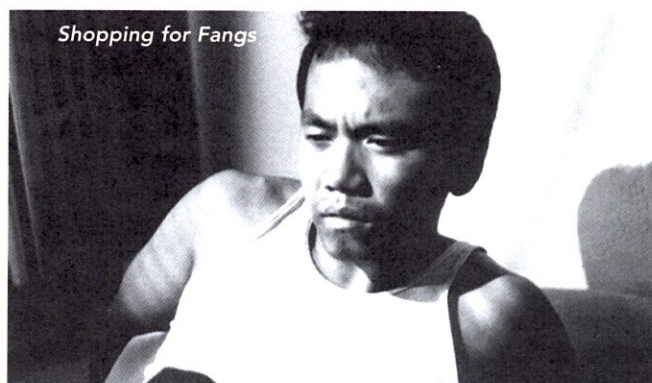


mirror which reflects back his face. After failing at his goal of ordering a hamburger in a restaurant filled with whites, he seems to have a mystical experience, which is precipitated either by seeing his own face reflected back from a glass-framed movie poster at a bus stop, or by a visit to a Buddhist temple. Each of these two scenes has its own visual logic: in the former scene, the Asian character's face is reflected back at him on top of Steven Seagal's impassive face on the movie poster, whereas in the latter scene, the streetsweeper and the Buddha seem to exchange glances in shot-reverse shot. The streetsweeper cuts off all his hair à la *Taxi Driver* and, having recognized his resemblance to the Buddha, he dresses in robes and offers himself to be photographed with and by white

15. Jade forges a better grade on her younger sister Pearl's report card so that their father will think Pearl has achieved straight A's, as a good Asian girl should; the family rehearses a "poem" of greeting in Cantonese for their uncle's arrival.

16. See Peter Feng, "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: *Chan Is Missing*," *Cinema Journal* 35, No. 4, Summer 1996, pp. 88-118, esp. pp. 104-5.

17. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Mary Anne Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 17-32; no doubt also of great influence here was Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); and the *locus classicus* in terms of race, of course, is Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).



tourists, thus actively entering into white imagery of the self posed before and in contrast to an ethnic other where before he had merely been an obstruction. The titular soybean milk container holds his earnings, and an Asian version of Madonna's "Material Girl" plays over the closing credits.

Lin's nameless streetsweeper is snared by media images which both exclude and captivate him. His solution is to conform himself to an image, in this case an icon of 'Sinicity,'¹⁸ and thus to become an image for others what they believe this ethnic "other" to be: a happy smiling Buddha which is at the furthest remove from the streetsweeper's daily experiences. The character's relation to the statue of Buddha, which is organized as shot-reverse shot, is structured on the principle of the two earlier shots in which the character sees his own reflection: once surrounded by images of Anglo's, then prior to his visit to the temple, when his face is reflected from the glass over a movie poster. The streetsweeper starts having the relationship to Buddha which he has to models and stars. Although Lin neither wrote nor directed the sequences of *Shopping for Fangs* involving Katherine and Trinh, this structure is nevertheless emblematic of the snares which trap all the characters in *Shopping for Fangs*: Katherine's "perfect" home and "ideal" husband are like suffocating images from a magazine; the character of Trinh dresses like a blonde Hollywood starlet circa 1950's, complete with dark glasses, and likewise Phil's "lycanthropy" is a disease he could only have caught from horror films. Indeed, Lin repeatedly poses Phil in front of a mirror, as each fresh growth of hair provides yet another horror in his ever-changing identity. None of these images are "natural" to these characters: Phil's hirsutism is no more "natural" to him than Trinh's dresses are to her, and the sudden changes in Phil's hair and beard are sudden, improbable, even pleasantly hokey—as if we're conspicuously not being asked to believe in Phil's plight.

Here we can mark yet another of the differences between *Shopping for Fangs* and *Double Happiness*, a difference which again springs from a point of contact. When *Double Happiness*'s Jade declares at a family gathering that she wants to become an actress, one female relative's immediate reaction is "Like Marilyn Monroe," a response which provokes mirth among the other female relatives and the feigned mirth of Jade herself. It's difficult not to think of this scene in the context of *Shopping for Fangs*, in which the gun-wielding lesbian diner waitress Trinh seems to be modeling herself on Marilyn Monroe (particularly in her stance) or some similar (white) blonde bombshell.¹⁹ Although *Double Happiness* lets Jade play Blanche Dubois and St. Joan in her fantasy world, the trajectory of that film is to humiliate her (through her two painful auditions) into recognizing that not only will she never be asked to play a character with anything but an "Asian" accent, but also at the same time Chinese-language roles are off-limits to her. (The story is somewhat different for Sandra Oh, the actress playing Jade, since she gets to play the part we're watching, a part which fulfills the wish expressed by the character: namely, to play the kind of part which gets one nominated for awards, as Oh was because of this film.)

Shum's Jade comes to know she will never be Marilyn

Monroe, but Lee's Trinh doesn't know this, or won't abide by the knowledge, and so Trinh acts the part anyway, and in her diegetic life, not an alternative imaginative universe. Trinh doesn't get the slap in the face that Jade gets in part because the separate spaces of socio-familial reality and individual imagination which can only collide in *Double Happiness* are already collapsed in *Shopping for Fangs*—in part because the familial definition of reality has itself been removed. *Shopping for Fangs* is more utopian, or perhaps pathological: the "reality" of other's images of one's self can be kept at bay, in part because one has already appropriated the other's image of itself as one's own. As Lin's streetsweeper at one moment takes a movie poster for a mirror, so Trinh (in segments written and directed not by Lin but by Lee) has taken a generalized image of a Hollywood starlet and said, as the child is believed to say before the mirror: "That's me!"

Beyond Narrative: Transtextuality

It's the relationship between the two films that's of the greatest interest, in part because ideas which are hinted at within *Double Happiness* become full-blown in *Shopping for Fangs*, and matters of behavior within the narrative of the former film are acted out or performed by the latter film as a whole, rather than merely by its characters. This comparison of the two films becomes particularly illuminating when we can point not only to similarities and differences but to the different textual levels at which these points of contact emerge, because it's at such moments that we can reflect upon the modes of analysis which are necessary to discuss these similarities and differences.

At one moment in *Double Happiness* Jade sings the song "Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting" and dances around the kitchen as she cleans. There's a certain campy wit in this staging of an Asian American character appropriating a mainstream popular cultural artifact (itself produced by artists of another minority) which markets a bogus conception of Easternness for mostly white audiences: it's rather like seeing a woman act the role of a drag queen's version of a woman, thus re-appropriating and commenting on another's image of her.²⁰ But this brief moment in *Double Happiness*, with all the complexities it implies about cultural identity and appropriation, are the entire substance of *Shopping for Fangs*, with its massive generic borrowings and cinematic references. In the latter case the film itself is dancing around the kitchen, appropriating while mocking mainstream imagery in order to re-negotiate the other's image of oneself, as well as one's own self-image.

These events in *Double Happiness* take place in what we can call, following Roland Barthes, the film's denotation and its connotations, whereas what we are pointing to in *Shopping for Fangs* would fall under a series of terms articulated by Gérard Genette under the heading of transtextuality—namely all sorts of relations amongst texts with other texts. Here Genette includes various forms of citation, which he calls intertextuality, commentary, which he calls metatextuality, and parody, send-up etc., which he dubs paratextuality, as well as the relation of a text to the pre-existing generic traits, both thematic and formal, which that text mobilizes, which relationships Genette designates architextuality.²¹ Where Shum arguably wants us to

enter into Jade's family and her world (the narrative denotation) through Shum's style, the subjectivities Lee and Lin want to construct for us are subjectivities constructed by a parade of pre-existing texts, and to do this, they must forgo authorial touches of the kind Shum applies. Much of *Shopping for Fangs* is at a degree-zero of style: Lin's werewolf segments are particularly notable for their intense narrative economy.²² The point of *Shopping for Fangs* is precisely to emphasize not only its characters' but its own dependency on other texts.

Some of these transtextual markers have already been mentioned: the *portmanteau* narrative structure already seems to refer to *Pulp Fiction*, and Trinh's appropriation of a blonde starlet image no doubt appeals not only to Marilyn Monroe but also to Kim Novak and *Vertigo* (1958), in which Novak played someone playing the role of a mad Gothic wife, much like the character of Katherine. But of course the major marker of generic appropriation in *Shopping for Fangs* is Phil's werewolfish hirsutism. Within the narrative denotation, this "problem" nicely captures Phil's sense of being socially ill-at-ease, and at the level of connotation, this figure carries over from the horror genre a thematic concern with identity, with unwanted transformations and socially unapproved, stigmatized identities. But most importantly, this narrative line riffs on the horror genre, while replacing the typically white central character with an Asian American.

Such paratextual shenanigans are also legible in Quentin Lee's earlier films. In *Flow*, Lee compiled his own short films together with a framing narrative concerning a self-absorbed filmmaker. In a Borgesian twist, Lee either has an actor play himself, or he ascribes his own films to a fictional character. This gives Lee the liberty of interviewing his alter ego and even criticizing his work as either self-indulgent or too conventional. The shorts themselves are apt to borrow from generic conventions of horror, science fiction and noir: in one film, the AIDS virus becomes airborne in 2001 and language-born in 2010; in another short, screams and knives abound; while in yet another a murder story is told in color flashbacks which interrupt a black-and-white interrogation. Similarly, another of Lin's shorts, *Come Fly with Me* (1995), depicts a tiny Asian American boy who idolizes Michael Jordan—and ends up putting himself in a box and mailing himself to his hero. The film liberally quotes the style of sneaker commercials, while replacing the basketball star with the young boy. The source text is thus held up as an image of admiration, while it is also hollowed out.

Here, too, there's a rather surprising point of contact with *Double Happiness*: when Jade finally appears on TV, it seems to be in the same kind of horror film which Justin Lin is ripping off in Phil's story. The TV character opposite Jade, speaking of a rash, says "I thought it was a zit at first. But then it started to swell, and now it's grown hairs. Oh my God!" One almost feels that Shum is tweaking the most commercially successful Canadian director, David Cronenberg, whose exploration of masquerades and Asian identity in his screen version of David Henry Hwang's brilliant and much-written-about play *M. Butterfly* failed to find satisfying formal or visual devices for expressing that play's paradoxes. While *Double Happiness* puts itself at one degree of remove from this kind of genre film,

Shopping for Fangs dives right in and won't separate itself from this kind of "unoriginal" mass media text. It's as if this one scene in *Double Happiness* has metastasized in *Shopping for Fangs* and become an entire narrative strand—the story of Phil's "lycanthropy."

Other markers of transtextuality could be cited, such as the fact that when Trinh and her "girlfriend," Katherine's husband, square off with guns, the moment is straight out of John Woo. But many such details are less important for the details of the original texts than they are for the way these signifiers function to index a generalized "movieness," a glamour and appeal which *Shopping for Fangs* wants to bring to Asian American characters. By taking Katherine's Gothic psychological trauma and Phil's hairy horror syndrome and replacing white with Asian American characters, the film effects a paratextual commentary on the absence of Asian characters from those genres,

18. Roland Barthes' describes "Chinese-ness" as the effect of specific semiotic and ideological operations: the stripper removes this already-suspect connotation (signified by an opium pipe) in order to become a "natural"—i.e., naked—woman. But while Barthes also analyzes the way the French bourgeoisie create a fortress of meanings for themselves, he does not consider, for instance, how an Asian striptease viewer would understand the opium pipe. See "Striptease" and "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1972). Barthes' English-language translator Richard Howard prefers "Sininess" (see p. 84), while Barthes himself expresses some equivocation in a footnote (p. 121).

The last shot of Shum's film frames Jade in a window of her basement apartment: she disappears from sight behind the curtain she hangs—which bears the names and images of various stars, including Marilyn Monroe.

19. In fact, when gay men are "camping"—trading catty remarks and calling each other "she"—they are in part enacting an exaggerated version of others' stereotype of themselves as "feminine" and as gay. Thus, insofar as camp in this sense enters into gay male drag, this element of irony is already present. See Esther Newton's *Mother Camp*, cited above.

20. Here Genette's interest is: "... everything which puts the text in a manifest or secret relation with other texts. I call that the *transtextuality*, and I include there *intertextuality* in the strict sense (and the 'classic' sense, since Julia Kristeva), that is to say, the literal presence (more or less literal, whole or partial), of one text in another: citation, that is to say, the explicit convocation of a text at the same time made present and distanced by quotation marks, is the most obvious example of this category of functions, which includes others as well. I also put here under this term, which imposes itself on the model of language/metalanguage, *metatextuality*, the transtextual relation which unites a commentary with the text on which it comments: all literary critiques, for centuries, produced a metatext without knowing it."

"... I put again other sorts of relations—for the essential, I think, of imitation and transformation, of which pastiche and parody can give an idea, or moreover two ideas, strongly different no matter how often confounded or inexactly distinguished—which I will baptize (for the want of a better term) *paratextuality* (but it is also for me *transtextuality* par excellence)..."

"I put here finally (without omission) that relation of inclusion which unites each text to the various types of discourse to which it appeals. Here belong the genres, and their determinations already encountered: thematic, modal, formal, and others. Let's call that... *l'architexte*, and *architextuality* or simply *architexture*..." Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979), pp. 87–88. The translation is my own.

21. I hope one example will suffice: Phil looks in the bathroom mirror and removes a pesky hair while an offscreen neighbor practices the trumpet (badly). As Phil's aggression grows, we return to the same set-up, but Phil interrupts his shaving to leave the frame and yell at the neighbor about the racket. All this dialogue is offscreen, while the frame is empty. Later, Phil believes he's killed his one-night stand Sammi: as he looks in the mirror, he hears the offscreen voices of detectives interrogating the neighbor. The series of three scenes each carefully prepares for the next—insignificant sound 'off' becoming significant. Such construction is a model of classical Hollywood economy, but it hardly thrusts the director's identity into view like Shum's slow motion shot-reverse shot sequences.

22. See the *Double Happiness* web site for this anecdote.

thus also effecting an architextual gesture of simultaneous participation and refusal of participation in a genre, a gesture which is a political stance, as well as an aesthetic one.

This kind of transtextual labor puts Lee and Lin closer to Gregg Araki, whose quotation of Anna Karina's haircut in *The Doom Generation* was so completely misapprehended by one French critic. This critical oversight is significant not just because it misunderstands the timeline according to which the film was made, but moreover because the critic understood this intertextual citation as a mere form of failure of (romantic) imagination and originality. (One wonders again why the same quotation would mean something different for Tarantino.) Instead, the significance of the critic's oversight is in the failure to understand what is going on in Araki's text—namely, the kind of transtextuality which I've tried to underline in *Shopping for Fangs* and which is what sets filmmakers like Gregg Araki, Quentin Lee and Justin Lin apart from an earlier generation. And the fact that Mina Shum's next film *Drive She Said* will reportedly be a road movie suggests that Shum is also moving in the direction Lee and Lin are currently exploring: out of the kitchen, away from the rice, and towards the territory Lee and Lin explore in *Shopping for Fangs*, which is an identity found neither home nor away from home and over the rainbow, but rather in transition.

Autonomy and Flight

Finally, both films arguably concern and terminate with flight as an expression of the characters' autonomy and of their cultural autonomy, their desired isolation from traditional Asian culture. *Double Happiness* narrates Jade's flight: she flees her white boyfriend by leaving in the morning before he's awoken, and her flight is made literal when she jumps off a swing upon discovering he's playing next to her; the climactic moment involves Jade fleeing one of the dates her family has arranged with a "nice Chinese boy", in this case a doctor who ironically seems to be played by the same actor who throws a drink in Andrew's face—I say "seems" because the doctor character's face is never seen! In this flight, Jade's seen running down the street, crying and flailing her arms to the thumping rock music soundtrack. It's a potent image—the opposite of the film's last image of Jade sitting in her crummy basement apartment surrounded by a little girl's idea of belongings. The entire film is Jade's slow-motion flight from her parents to a life by herself, a traditional coming-of-age film told with Chinese characters and made modern through Shum's stylistic panache.

Similarly, all the characters in *Shopping for Fangs* are in flight—or they are even, at times, immobilized. Although Phil chains himself to his bed to avoid the effects of his "lycanthropy," he ends up getting in his car and driving "anywhere," joined by Katherine, who's in the driver's seat. Katherine flees perpetually from her stultifyingly "perfect" husband (who tries to rape her) and her immaculate house. Trinh's home is a hotel-room, which bespeaks her transience, and against the picture-perfect but ultimately imprisoning house of Katherine's marriage, the image of the hotel room (which is central in Araki's *The Doom Generation*) provides a kind of relief. Even before Katherine drives off at the film's end, her blackouts signal a psychological state known in technical terms as "fugue"—

which is Latin for "flight."

While such images of flight and independence may be somewhat idealized, it is almost impossible in these two films to lose sight of the price one pays for this flight, of what we hold onto even as we flee. It is here that *Double Happiness* and *Shopping for Fangs* are most useful, since both suggest ways for thinking about questions of identity that go beyond a simple concept of the "liberation" of a "true" identity. And on the analytical level, the contrast between the two films allows us to examine analytical issues without either fetishizing formal language and formal innovation or taking specific stylistic features as being tantamount to a "postmodern subjectivity" which is somehow free from any and all constraints of the past. Rather, these films suggest some ways in which what is posed as freedom and flight is precisely a renegotiation of those constraints.

Mina Shum says that when she moved out of her parents' house at the age of 18, she was clutching a *Star Wars* blanket.²³ The moment is perfect: psychologist D. W. Winnicott theorized that the transitional object was some little fragment of reality which provided the infant with comfort in his or her individuation and separation from the mother, and this transitional object was often something as simple as the corner of the child's blanket. If Shum frames the flight she narrates in psychological and familial terms, as a developmental narrative towards individuality, the little detail she gives us outside the text—that it's a *Star Wars* blanket—is germane to *Shopping for Fangs*, since what that film does is to frame its characters' adaptations not in terms of any transition to autonomy but in terms of a dependence much like the film's own on mass cultural images. Both films are mournful about this autonomy, and thus implicitly question autonomy's value, although not perhaps as much as David Henry Hwang's recent play *Golden Child* has done.²⁴ But in both these films, like in Hwang's play, we can see an interrogation of cultural identity and Western autonomy starting to take place, a questioning which affects the filmmakers as well as their characters.

In *Shopping for Fangs* the characters are already "autonomous"—or in any case alone—but their autonomy reveals their dependence upon the detritus of white pop culture as a kind of transitional object—like Shum's lonely *Star Wars* blanket. A banal pop song like "Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting," the image of Marilyn Monroe, or Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, or of an old Universal werewolf movie: these mark the spot where the "autonomous" culture, thinking itself free from family and tradition, plants its feet, even as it's slip-sliding away. What remains to be explored in the future is whether this "transition" to autonomy is ever really achieved or whether perhaps mainstream popular culture as a sort of orthopedic device does not in the end become a permanent if always foreign part of the living being whose development to autonomy it would seem to enable. But that narrative would be something more like a Cronenberg movie: more precisely, the one he didn't make in *M. Butterfly*.

23. See John Lahr's astute review of the same in *The New Yorker*, December 2, 1996, pp. 121-123.

24. See John Lahr's astute review of the same in *The New Yorker*, December 2, 1996 pp. 121-123

Irma Vep

by Susan Morrison

OLIVIER ASSAYAS, A FRENCH FILMMAKER WHOSE RECENT films such as *L'Eau froide* (1994) have placed him in the neo- (or is that 'nouveau?') *nouvelle vague*, brought a film to the 1996 Toronto Film Festival which is a real curiosity. *Irma Vep*, like Truffaut's *Day for Night*, is about the making of a film, and as such, foregrounds the intricate machinations of behind-the-scène intrigues. However, its politics are extra-diegetic as well. *Irma Vep* not only serves as a compendium of observations on the state of French filmmaking today, but throws in for good measure, references to precisely the *nouvelle vague* that signified France's last golden age of cinema, current Hollywood fare, and the *raison d'être* for this writer's interest in Chinese film, the Hong Kong film industry and star system.

Like Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), this film was written, shot, and edited in a breathtakingly short amount of time compared to the usual lengthy genesis of industry films; 10 days for the script, 4 weeks for production. Described by the director as a 'playful film', *Irma Vep* has the look and feel of a fully-formed meditation on the intersection (and vivisection) of periods and cultures that characterises so much of contemporary international film.¹

Casting is everything in this film. The part of the director, René Vidal, is played by a shaggy Jean-Pierre Léaud, whose very presence can't help but evoke memories of Truffaut and Godard. A filmmaker past his prime, Vidal has undertaken the remake of a 1915 silent serial, Louis Feuillade's *Les Vampires*. (An undertaking drawn from Assayas's own personal experience several years ago, when he toyed with the idea of a TV version, but never got past the planning point.) One of the prime conceits of this remake is that Vidal has selected a Hong Kong movie star, Maggie Cheung—played by Hong Kong movie star Maggie Cheung—to star as the female lead character Irma Vep.² (The other is that he intends to shoot it 'silent' in respect for the original version.)

The film opens with Ms. Cheung arriving at the film studio, fresh off the plane from Hong Kong, ready to begin work. While a fabulously successful star in her own country, she is unknown and hence unrecognised by any of the French.³ Unable to speak the language, she communicates only in English. An assistant takes her to see Vidal, who screens for her two film sequences. The first, a clip from a popular 1992 Hong Kong film *The Heroic Trio*, depicts an aerial fight between two female characters (Anita Mui and Maggie



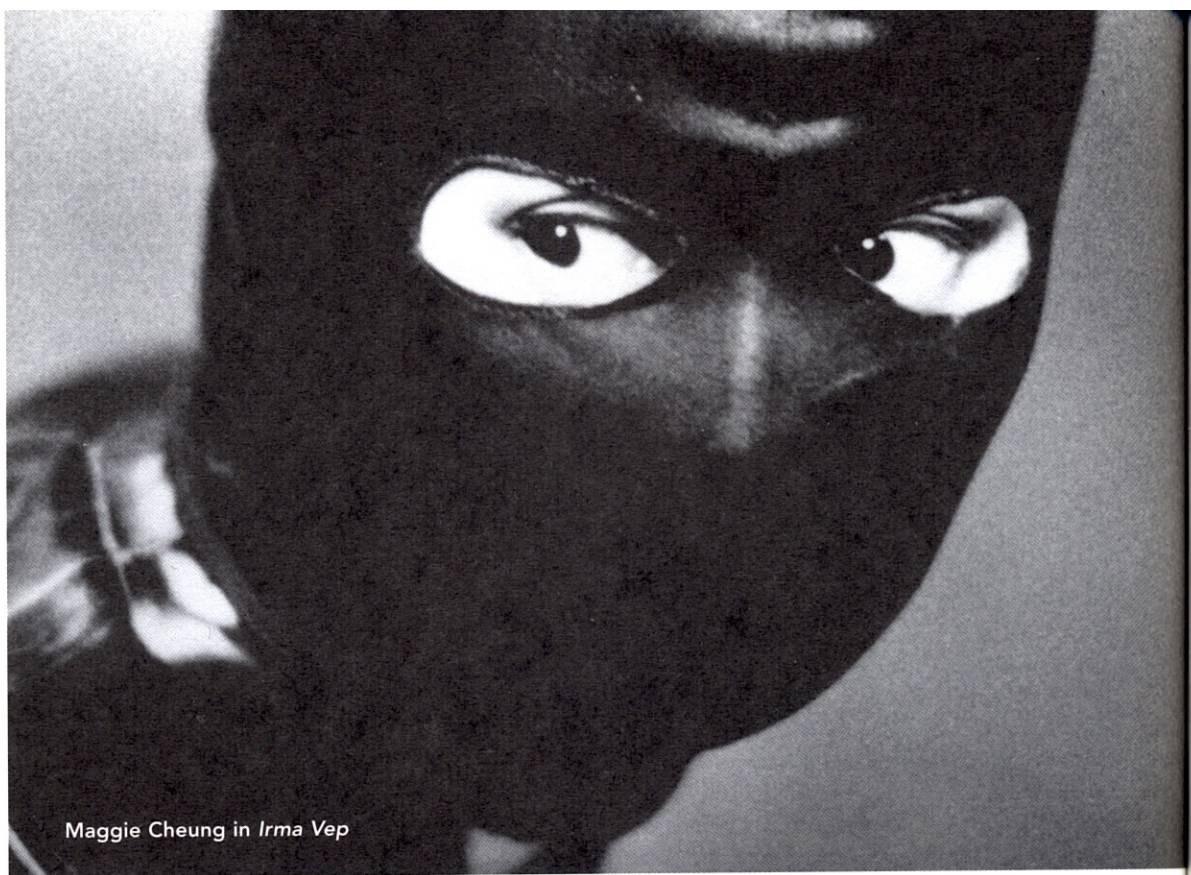
Maggie Cheung

Cheung) with superhuman powers. Shot in a monochrome filtered light, using close-ups, wire work and such typical special effects as a bullet speeding through the air being deflected by a similarly speeding metal dart, the sequence is a classic of its genre—'kung fu superhero fantasy' films. Vidal praises her screen work, and explains that he has come to believe that she is the only actress who could play the role of a 'modern' Irma Vep. (For some unexplained reason, he pronounces it 'Wep'). Ms. Cheung self-effacedly claims that it

1 Another interesting example of this cultural *mélange* from the Film Festival was Taiwan director Edward Yang's *Mahjong* (1996), which co-starred the French actress Virginie Ledoyen, Assayas's lead in *L'Eau froide*. To the sound of American pop songs, and the setting of Taipei's Hard Rock café, she plays a very young Parisienne abandoned by her English lover who falls in with a group of adolescent would-be gangsters. As in *Irma Vep*, the *lingua franca* is English, not French.

2 'Irma Vep', we come to discover, is an anagram. Assayas inserts a clip from the original silent film in which the letters on a large theatre poster that make up the word 'VAMPIRE' are animated to rearrange themselves, forming the two words 'IRMA VEP'.

3. Life imitates art. It seems that Ms. Cheung's presence at the Toronto film festival was similarly unheralded.



Maggie Cheung in *Irma Vep*

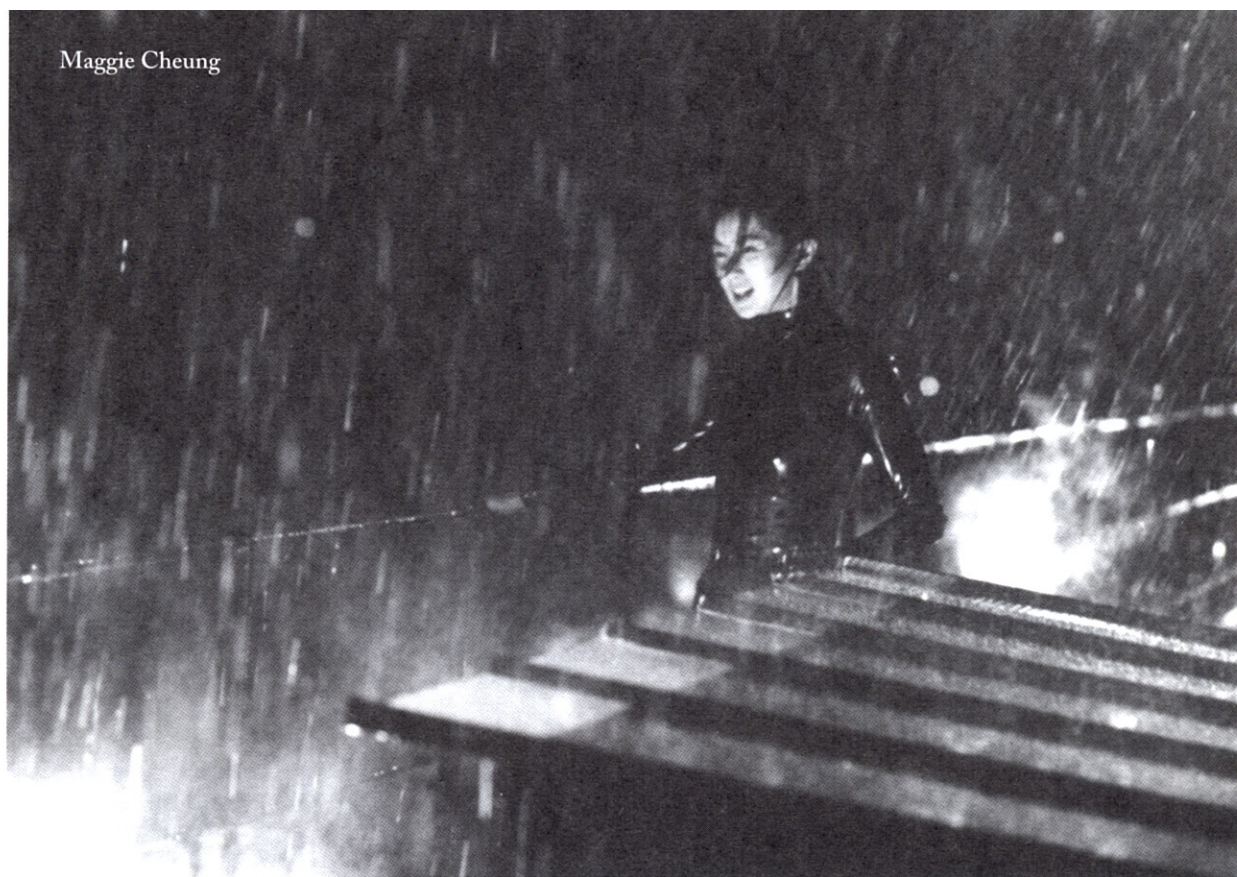
was all special effects; that she really had done nothing much. The next film clip Vidal screens is from the original silent film of *Les Vampires*. In it, Irma Vep, played by the actress Musidora, is shown entering a building in a form-fitting one-piece 'cat burglar' costume. She is caught from behind by a man, who drags her into a room, removes her mask, and chloroforms her. Ms. Cheung's task, it appears, will be to reprise Musidora's role.

She is then taken to an s&m shop where Zoë (Natalie Richard), the film's costume designer, has her try on a black latex bondage suit and headpiece that covers all but her eyes. When Ms. Cheung questions the choice of outfit, as it doesn't seem to match her idea of the part, Zoë, pulling out a publicity photo from *Batman II* of Cat Woman/Michelle Pfeiffer, claims that this is exactly the look that René wants. The suit is obviously uncomfortable to wear...she keeps complaining about it throughout the film, as do the other actresses who have to wear similar costumes. However, it becomes the focus later on for a number of incidents of identification and misidentification; from its being used as an indicator of potential lesbian tendencies (Zoë mistakes Maggie's stated wish to purchase it after the shoot is over, as an invitation to come on to her sexually) to a peculiar scene, narratively unmotivated, in which Ms. Cheung puts on the costume after work and becomes a 'real' cat burglar, entering an unknown woman's (Arsinée Khanjian) hotel room and stealing some jewellery, only to discard it afterwards.

It is ironic throughout the film, that the catsuit is the only 'locus' where Maggie Cheung, one of the most beautiful of all actresses, is allowed to exude a glamorous sexuality. For the

most part, she is dressed in plain, unassuming clothing with little makeup and hairstyling, as an 'off-screen' character in all ways. The high styling of her Hong Kong persona is far removed. Even when she is 'made-up', as in the shooting scenes, it's an odd kind of make-up... white powdered face, but not the impeccably detailed features of a perfect Chinese 'film face' that one might expect to go with it. In fact, the closest we get to this comes in a brief scene just prior to the above-mentioned burglary. Maggie is in her room, unable to sleep. She puts on the bondage suit, and obviously agitated, moves restlessly to and fro on her bed. The rapid cutting, fragmented close-ups, highly stylized visuals and American pop song on the soundtrack seem consciously to pay homage to Wong Kar-wai's *Fallen Angels* (1995), especially the scene where Michelle Reis moves to Laurie Anderson's music.⁴ In contrast, however, *Fallen Angels'* Ms. Reis is always glamorised by the camera, presented to us in an impossibly perfect, deadpan kind of way, even when she's scrubbing the floor or putting out the garbage for 'Killer'.

To return to *Irma Vep's* narrative, Vidal stops production of the remake of *Les Vampires* after a single sequence has been shot. At a screening of the 'daily', (a reconstruction of the original film footage that had been screened earlier on by Vidal for Maggie), he storms out in disgust at what he's seen, describing it later as 'just images, no soul'. When José Murano (Lou Castel) a former colleague of Vidal's, (coded for us as an erstwhile political director by the inscription 'Chiapas' across the back of his bright orange jacket) is brought in to replace him, the first thing he does is fire Maggie Cheung. *Les Vampires* isn't *Fu Manchu*, he says to the French actress he hires as her



replacement. He sees Irma Vep as Arletty, a denizen of the slums of Paris, and definitely not a 'Chinoise'. The film ends with a kind of reprise of the earlier screening room scene. However, now it's Murano who is being shown the existing footage from Vidal's shoot, furtively edited by him at night. When the black-and-white images appear, we, along with Murano, see the identical scene as before, with Maggie dressed as Irma Vep in the catsuit, all but her eyes covered in the mask. As the first shot cuts abruptly to the second, however, there is an extradiegetic scratchy sound, which is repeated each time a cut occurs. This isn't what we saw or heard the first time. Presently, a closeup of Maggie's hooded face develops animated rays shooting out of her eyes. The filmic surface thus agitated soon breaks up into circles and jagged lines that dance and flutter across each frame, punctuated by those same scratchy sounds. From a more-or-less faithful remake of a silent film, we seem to have entered the world of avant-garde cinema. On the other hand, ironically enough, there's an eerily close resemblance between the dynamic images we saw earlier from *The Heroic Trio*, and what's become of *Irma Vep* through non-traditional editing, scratched animation (*grattage sur pellicule*) and scratched sound effects. It's as if Vidal at last managed to find a way to return film to a vital art form, not through imitation but through experimentation.

The Hong Kong connection is worth a brief digression here. Assayas's prior interest in Hong Kong film is underscored by the information given in the press handout that he co-wrote a book on Hong Kong film in 1984. He first met Ms. Cheung at an International Film Festival... I am assuming that it would have been Berlin or Chicago in 1992, where she

won Best Actress Award for her performance in Stanley Kwan's *Centre Stage* (1991)⁵. Assayas was so taken with her that he thought of constructing a film for and around her, and later, when he actually met her, he realized that he'd written the part of Irma Vep for her.

There are so many similarities between *Irma Vep* and *Centre Stage* that I don't think they're coincidental. First, there's the fact that Maggie Cheung is the star of both films. Second, that she plays 'herself' in both films, and as such, is subjected to interviews about film and filmmaking. Third, that as 'Maggie Cheung', she is asked to replay the role of a silent film star, as Ruan Lingyu in *Centre Stage*, in place of Musidora in *Irma Vep*. Fourth, that black-and-white sequences from the original silent films are inserted into each film and fifth, that we are shown the behind-the-scenes shooting of those sequences (re-shooting, in the case of *Irma Vep*) in colour. That Vidal's remake of *Les Vampires* is shot in black-and-white, and shot silent, as if it were an early silent film, brings the film even closer to *Centre Stage*'s recreation of the production of Ruan Lingyu's films. And finally, *Centre Stage*'s concern with the career of a major Chinese film star from the silent period enables an examination into the conditions and practices of film production from that period and by extension and in contrast, to those of present-day mainland China. *Irma Vep* does the same thing with regards to French film.

4. Christopher Doyle, Wong's director of photography, is acknowledged and thanked in the film's credits. In the press handout for *Irma Vep*, Assayas refers to Doyle as the person who had initially introduced him to Maggie Cheung, an actress he had heard was 'inaccessible'.

5. See Julian Stringer's article in this issue for a detailed analysis of the film.

For Ever Mozart

by David Thomas Lynch



PERHAPS JEAN-LUC GODARD FELT THAT HIS PRESENCE AT the 1996 Toronto International Film Festival overshadowed the ostensible reason for his visit: his new feature, *For Ever Mozart* (1996). At the film's press conference, he noted that while he is "more interested in pictures than in directors,... people today praise the man more than the work"...While the director seems more interested in the substance of his picture than in his public persona, I think his public comments are both helpful in understanding the new film, and interesting in their own right. Godard's press notes call *For Ever Mozart* "Four films which don't necessarily make one" (Although the film is not made of four discrete narratives): theatre, war, cinema, and music.

During the Bosnian conflict, a group of actors travels to Sarajevo to perform Musset's *One Must Not Play at Love*; on the way there, they are captured by soldiers and end up in a mass grave. It is Godard's change of approach to his film actors, however, which reveals more of his current thoughts about performance than this plot. Asked how his filmmaking practice has changed over the years, he suggested that now he pays attention to casting, giving the film a unity and the potential to be interesting as a whole, not merely in parts. *For Ever Mozart*'s cast of (to me) unknowns melds into an actual ensemble; there are no leads cast for their iconic presence, or stars in "anti-star" performances. Instead, the performers act with a certain emotional resonance that derives its power from the way the characters refract the concerns of the film as a whole. Usually a Godard film has had certain characters who serve this function, while other roles were caricatures, or were cast symbolically or iconically. The emotional evenness provided

by the film's ensemble work is perhaps the most notable element that *For Ever Mozart* adds to Godard's body of work.

In contrast to this innovation, Godard's treatment of warfare has strong parallels to the action in *Les Carabiniers* (1963), *Weekend* (1967) and the video *Le Français entendu par JLG* (1988). The appearance of mass violence, war machines and explosions in these films and *For Ever Mozart* exerts a certain fascination that is more spectacular and visceral than the attention usually demanded by Godard's movies. A comparison between the execution of the woman reciting Mayakovsky in *Les Carabiniers* and the mass murder of the actors in the new film shows how the director has become more open to displays of compassion, but in the end the increased intensity of the action is not meant to raise our outrage against the war by exciting us emotionally. Talking about war coverage on the TV news, Godard said: "We see Sarajevo; two seconds later, we forget". This is less a comment on the concerns of the TV audience than a critique of the inability of images of suffering to communicate that to the viewers.

Like Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), *For Ever Mozart* uses the Bosnian war as a backdrop for the examination of today's cinema. The former film depicted war as the ultimate enemy of art, and film in particular; both Angelopoulos and his director-protagonist lost their way when confronted with it. Godard does justice to the war, but in this latest trip to the self-reflexive well he comes up dry. Watching *First Name: Carmen* (1983), all we learned was that Godard, at that point, felt sick of moviemaking—but at least that feeling was communicated. Godard's treatment of the film-within-*For Ever Mozart* is emotionally blank; he's interested, but he doesn't

care about this movie, whose production takes up most of the second half of his own film. Despite the best efforts of the cast, this makes the latter part of the film drag (even compared to other Godard films). Perhaps he is saving up his insights into film for the next installment of *Histoires du Cinema*, his semi-documentary video series.

If film is slighted in *For Ever Mozart*, music becomes more of a concern. The title of the film plays on, "il faut rever Mozart," and Godard spoke of music as "a companion" at the press conference. I asked him how his use of music differed when he used popular (e.g. *Soigne ta Droite* (1987)) and classical music; he replied that Mozart's music was part of the film from its conception and that the music had helped him to write a film. Godard had also been invited to show a favorite film as part of the "Dialogues" series at the Festival; he chose Rob Tregenza's *Talking to Strangers* (1987), an American movie made up of nine long takes which Godard described as

a film about "Listening to pictures". Il faut rever...perhaps music allows more room for dreaming than cinema does, or did. The performance of Mozart at the film's conclusion also allows Godard to use the flipping of sheet music as a metaphor for changes in life. It's our duty to turn the pages in our own lives, Godard explained; "sometimes it's nice, sometimes it's painful".

For Ever Mozart is a sometimes nice, sometimes painful page in Godard's career as a whole. In response to an overly abstract question at the press conference, Godard shrugged and said, "I'd like to speak of what I have in my hands". I'm reminded of Woody Allen putting strips of 35mm film together with a needle and thread at the end of *King Lear* (1987). Godard would like to craft a film that could pass from his hands to the audience's, a film that is useful to them; but if the film isn't useful, it just becomes "a Godard film". This is the struggle behind *For Ever Mozart*.



REVOLUTIONS THAT FAIL: Michael Collins

by Scott Forsyth

NEIL JORDAN'S CONTROVERSIAL FILM of the Irish revolution and its central leader was a Gala at last year's Festival. It is a good example of the Festival's balancing act between promotional glitz and programming innovative and political films and films from national cinemas marginalized by the globalizing media conglomerates. *Michael Collins* is a rarity, a political subject about one of those marginalized nations, but produced by one of the globalizing Hollywood majors. It is a film that illustrates the tensions and dilemmas posed by increasing cultural globalization and the fragile state of national cinemas around the world. As well, while critics have highlighted the film's relatively explicit politics—its celebration of a revolution and its heroes, when political discourse rules out revolutions from the realm of the possible—it also shows us some of the political and historical limitations of big-budget cinema.

The film's historical narrative begins with the Easter Rising of 1916 and follows the guerrilla war against the British through to the truce and the establishment of the Irish Free State. Its tragic culmination is the civil war which ensued and Collins' death at the hands of his former comrades. Generically, the film uneasily combines conventions and narrative features of both the bio-pic and the national epic. Collins is portrayed with boisterous energy by Liam Neeson as an everyman saint, humanising a Great Man of History. 'The Big Fella' is, of course, bigger and louder than everyone around him, but his greatness is that of an ordinary man called on for extraordinary action. We see him on the stages of theatrical politics but also follow his touching sensitivity in the famous romantic triangle with fellow leader Harry Boland and Kitty Kiernan. He chuckles over his talent for 'mayhem'—a comic evocation of Collins' legendary military brilliance and ruthlessness—but voices requisite moral anxiety over the necessity of violence. That anxiety is belied by the film's exhilarating depiction of the guerrilla terror against the British. Partly, this is celebration of the revolution, but it also reflects the film's narrowing of the political discourse to the morality and utility of violence for political aims. The moralistic focus on the violence of revolutionaries tends to



underplay the centuries of systemic colonial violence and offers itself as a narrow intervention into the contemporary impasse of IRA terror and continuing British occupation. More broadly, it reflects the film's final focus, despite the romanticization of the revolution's heroes, on the revolution's tortuous detour. While the film's trajectory, as in many biopics, is to a hagiographic martyrdom, Collins' sacrifice consecrates the failure of the revolution.

Thom Anderson's superb discussion, "Red Hollywood," recounts the studio blacklist in the 40s and 50s and examines the limits and strategies of leftist filmmaking within corporate culture.¹ He quotes Robin Blackburn's comment that "bourgeois sociology only begins to understand modern revolutions in so far as they fail" to argue that bourgeois cinema similarly prefers to sentimentalise and romanticize revolutionary defeat. This holds true for countless swashbucklers—for example, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*—played out against counter-revolutionary restoration in England or France, and for more progressive films, like *Viva Zapata!* or *Burn! Michael Collins* is in this lineage. Collins becomes a hero as much for being "devoured" by the revolution as for his achievements.

The film's explanation for failure, and all its emotional energy, are entirely within nationalism. Jordan obviously feels he is making a nationalist epic, despite his contradictory views of the revolution, a tale of national hopes and tragedy that can speak to contemporary conflicts. Cinematically, this is signalled by the attention to historical veracity, the spectacular recreation



of famous battles, the loving detail in period costume, language and performance. Jordan, in promotional interviews, emphasised the historic importance he placed on his film. The hysterical attacks on the film's supposed "incitement" to terrorism by the right-wing British press respond with fear to its supposed utility as nationalist epic, to the use of the historic in the present. The aspiration is perhaps to what Fredric Jameson calls national allegories in discussing the anti-imperialist literature of the "third world". However, if we think momentarily of Eisenstein's or Pudovkin's recreations of revolution as spectacle, in realisation, *Michael Collins* corresponds more exactly to

the films Jameson elsewhere calls nostalgia films, recreation of the past for passive remembrance, for the "evacuation of history."

This is most evident in the film's treatment of the nature of the revolution's defeat or partial compromised victory. There is no doubt that the Irish revolution has stalled for most of the century—it failed to secure independence and the national boundaries of genuine national liberation; it produced the authoritarian and backward theocratic Free State; it has foundered in communal and sectarian terrorism for decades. But Jordan's film presents its historic impasse entirely as a conundrum of violence within a circumscribed nationalist frame. We can feel the emotional pull of nationalism but have little or no sense of the demands for social transformation that fuelled the revolution, or how their thwarting led to demoralisation and factional destruction. Perhaps spectators might know something of the Marxist James Connolly, who we see executed by the British, propped in a chair, or they might know of de Valera's reactionary Catholic nationalism. But the film is silent on any political complexity; it simply dramatises a binary factionalism between fanaticism and moderation, intransigence and compromise. Collins plays Danton to de Valera's ascetic and manipulative Robespierre in a counter-revolutionary morality tale we have seen many times. Analytically, and tragically, the many stalled nationalist revolutions of the third world have suffered from moderation, compromise and co-optation; they have failed to socially challenge imperialism and reproduced in neo-colonialist parody

the social order apparently overthrown. Ireland is virtually a prototype of this process but the films' fable fossilises the revolution around its moral defaults, eliding this social and economic dilemma—surely one of the most obvious and important of the 20th century—by what Jordan calls "an examination of conscience". But this finally explains little and hence the vacuity of the film's hagiographic conclusion; the reverent resuscitation of Collins' memory will finally move history. The historical functions as a lament, rather than the explosive in the present that the successful political film makes it.

Interestingly, Jordan also understood his nationalist purposes as part of commercial strategies. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* (November 14, 1996), he commented that his film's national importance allowed a cheaper way to make large-scale action cinema with government willingness to provide downtown Dublin as a set—a grander scale than \$30 million usually buys. If anything, this speaks to the mobility of current Hollywood production, able to move rapidly anywhere financial advantages apply. Similarly, the simplistic reduction of complex political struggles speaks to the commodification of nations themselves, each able to tell one or two simple national tales in the global cultural marketplace; last year's epics of Scottish nationalism, *Rob Roy* and *Braveheart* preparing the ground for this year's stage-Irish revolutionaries. Doubtless, these films rely on popular anti-imperialist nationalism but that functions within a globalized exchange of nations as commodities, much the way destinations are advertised for tourism with the most palatable stereotypes; we cinematically tour the Irish revolution or Scottish rebellion and the beautifully exotic landscapes converge with the historical distancing of a safely past struggle.

Jordan extended his living museum-like view of the past to the conventions of performance and commented that the film's demure and courtly portrayal of its *ménage à trois* was inspired by his sense of different physicality and sexuality in the early century. On one hand, this freezes the past unusably as a nostalgic artefact and even avoids Collins' well known sexual exploits. On the other it allows the stilted and under-written performance of Julia Roberts as Kitty Kiernan to make minimal sense, even while her mere presence is a marker of the imperatives of globalized financing and consumption. A number of critics unfavourably compared this conservative use of conventions to *The Crying Game*'s scandalous surprises, but that infamous daring was entwined with a strikingly reactionary deployment of the femme fatale in a simplistic anti-IRA diatribe.

Historical contradiction and blockage are the stuff of revolutions, but complex social explosions may not cohere with the narrative forms of corporate demands. Jordan's film may consign the unfinished revolution to the past, despite its ongoing relevance to contemporary imperialism—but it still progressively evokes the courage and creativity of those who fought the mighty empire to a standstill. This may be a limited lineage in progressive commercial cinema, but it is doubtless still important.

1. In Susan Ferguson and Brenda Groseclose, eds., *Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society*. Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1985.

Michelangelo Antonioni: The Late Years

by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe

THE EUROPEAN CINEMA, FROM ITS EARLY DAYS, WAS ROOTED in avant-garde modernist movements which continued to influence and inform the development of what was later termed the European art film. Michelangelo Antonioni's cinema is part of the post-World War II questioning and rethinking of narrativity, modernism, the directorial voice, the importance of environment and setting, and the viewer's positioning. These concerns belong to a European tradition that considered cinema a unique forum for exploring ideas regarding class and social relations, and the notion of the artist's responsibility to function as a social critic is a longstanding aspect of its culture.

The European art film and the challenges it presented to mainstream, studio-produced filmmaking was particularly potent in the 1960s and early 1970s with the director's vision and self-expression fully celebrated. This concept of the filmmaker/*auteur* and the *caméra-stylo* allowed for the elaboration of a signature use of such elements as style, performance, thematic concerns and preferred actors; its significance was enhanced by the politicized revaluations of contemporary social politics then taking place after the war and the changing attitudes towards the function of art and entertainment.

In the last decade it has become increasingly difficult to claim this cinema to be of value. It has been labelled the product of a white middle-class hegemony and worse, it is now viewed as being intrinsic to the 'dominant' cinema. As such, it is considered over-valued and in its place there has been a shift toward the promotion of marginalized voices—the Third World, Asia, Cuba, Africa. The acknowledgment and highlighting of these cinemas is certainly valid and necessary but it is absurd and misdirected to dismiss the tradition of the European art film and deny its validity and value as a consequence. In the department of cinema studies in which we teach it has been intentionally overlooked within curricular offerings. Somehow this policy is meant to redress the imbalance and rectify past sins; however, the result of this neglect is the suppression of the history necessary to understand contemporary social experience and forms of representation, as

well as the denial of the correspondences and crossover influences between, for example, Fernando Solanas/Octavio Gettino and Jean-Luc Godard.

There are, in fact, various threads complicating the problem and one is the fall of authorship. It is fashionable to look at a work as a post-modern product of contemporary culture, not as the sustained vision of an artist. In part, this banishment of the author is a result of shifting academic tastes. On a more practical note, it has become increasingly difficult to see the later work of many major European directors because distributors are no longer willing to gamble on a product which lacks sure commercial viability. The works of established directors such as Claude Chabrol, Margarethe Von Trotta and Bertrand Tavernier are inconsistently distributed, and their availability is primarily restricted to the rounds of international film festivals and cinemathèque retrospectives.¹ The less challenging films, like *Cinema Paradiso*, do attain distribution because they often parallel the commercial Hollywood product, providing similar sentimental and reassuring gratifications. Another trend has been to redefine the art house film through the British cinema's appropriation of the 19th century novel in the conservative tradition of television's Masterpiece Theatre.

The late works of Antonioni have not evoked critical interest and have failed to receive distribution. Despite his recently receiving an honorary Academy Award, Antonioni's films no longer meet the standards of contemporary tastes and the intellectual former left-wing critic/academic contingent snub him. The situation brings to the fore questions not spoken: What criteria are being used to judge these works? What is considered of value today?

Antonioni's films have always been contemplative and personal. Their thematic, particularly in the little-seen *Identification of a Woman* (1982) and his most recent film, *Beyond the Clouds* (1995), is an exploration of the creative process, the search for a story, a setting, the appropriate protagonists.² Both *Identification of a Woman* and *Beyond the Clouds* feature a male director/filmmaker who signals



Antonioni, the artist, and his own voice, and that voice belongs to a white Italian male heterosexual. Antonioni's vision is marked by a masculine point of view, but the films are not unaware of this and the works reflect the filmmaker's limitations and confusions regarding changing gender roles in contemporary society. In both *Identification of a Woman* and *Beyond the Clouds*, Antonioni's visual sensibility complicates his presentation of the female body in scenes of sexual encounters. Although the women are often strong and enjoy their own sexual pleasure, the emphasis on the female body borders on the uncomfortable, raising questions of the aestheticization and hence objectification of the female body

Identification of a Woman takes male-female relations as its problematic: the male's ideal does not exist and the women

refuse to be contained or possessed by an archaic vision of the artist and his muse. The director, Nicolo/Tomas Milian, cannot ultimately sustain a successful relationship because of this. By the end of the film he is no closer to realizing his project and the women he encounters have an agenda of their own and insist on directing themselves. The John Malkovich character in *Beyond the Clouds* is more ambiguous. He shares his voice with a number of other male characters who are used to

1. We are fortunate to have in Toronto both the Toronto International Film Festival and the Cinematheque Ontario which is headed by the committed and intelligent James Quandt who continues to support European film despite its current rejection by much of the academic world.

2. *Identification of a Woman* was screened in Toronto at the 1983 Festival of Festivals. The film never opened theatrically in Canada, but was screened last fall at the Cinematheque Ontario.

dramatize the encounters he narrates. Malkovich, whose character is also a director, introduces a number of vignettes which address the difficulties of love: the eternal ideal romance which can never be consummated, the 'Oedipal' couple, infidelity. These stories speak of the tensions in Antonioni's vision—on the one hand, the desire to idealize the woman as beautiful, mysterious, 'other,' and at the same time, the recognition that this impulse is egocentric and leads to an impasse. The protagonists of the stories are often presented as being lost, confused and, at times, impotent. The narratives are structured around a desire to achieve a resolution which eludes them, resulting in an ironic dead end.

Identification of a Woman and *Beyond the Clouds* are meditative films following the traditions of the post-World War II essay film. The pleasure the films offer is bound to a different concept of the cinema's potential, one that has been increasingly marginalized in recent years. This results in demanding films that fluctuate between conventional narratives and an intangible sense of aesthetic poetry often communicated through a masterful treatment of style and visual imagery. The characters are not psychologically rounded figures accessible to viewer identification. Antonioni places these characters at a distance, and many of them are not particularly likeable.

Within Antonioni's conception, location and composition are as integral as character development. The opening episode in *Beyond the Clouds*, which takes place in Ferrara, playfully introduces the thematic of the film, regarding desire and gratification. Malkovich, the director, pointedly connects this to the location—to Ferrara and its inhabitants. This is in keeping with Antonioni's conception of the cinema as a medium which is expressly concerned with the interplay between visual architecture and a character's development. The sequence in *Identification of a Woman* in which Nicolo loses his female companion in a thick fog in the countryside is a striking example of this kind of visual expression. Aside from the sense of beauty the visuals communicate, the sequence dramatizes the male's inability to see and understand the needs of his lover. It is *tour-de-force* filmmaking which, like good poetry, condenses a complex of emotions and tensions through a series of evocative images—here, Antonioni blurs the line between the real and the imaginary, evoking a dreamscape. Similarly, the Portofino sequence, which features a contemplative Malkovich on a deserted beach during the off-season, produces an intense elegiac feeling which is compounded as the character functions as Antonioni's surrogate.

The above-mentioned fog sequence in *Identification of a Woman* recalls Anna's disappearance in *L'Avventura*. In that film Antonioni also uses the barrenness of the island and the sea in a similar way—it functions as narrative commentary, speaking what the characters cannot voice. Antonioni's style depends on the viewer's willingness to 'read' visuals in this way—it is how the narrative offers detailed exposition and explanation for the characters and their identities. The films are dependent on *mise-en-scene*, image, costume, setting—and contemporary audiences are not as willing to meet Antonioni's demands. Or, conversely, the audience tends to regard the films' rich visual texture as background decoration; but, for

instance, in *Identification of a Woman*, Antonioni is concerned that the tiles on the wall of a *haut-bourgeois* apartment building are displayed as they function as a visual detail that tellingly comments on Nicolo's fascination with the status of the woman he is pursuing.

Beyond the Clouds faces the same problems of most films that feature a number of short stories: not all the episodes are equally strong. The first episode suffers particularly from the unevenness of the actors' performance—the female actor, a popular model in Europe, may have simply been chosen because of her appearance—and its somewhat slender narrative line. In contrast, a relatively short episode which is centred on a man's pursuit through the streets of Aix-en-Provence of a young woman who is on the eve of entering a Catholic nunnery, is successful in part because of the accomplished performances of Irene Jacob and Vincent Perez. Similarly, the film's longest story, which takes place in Paris, relies heavily on the strength and presence of Fanny Ardant and her characterization of an older woman who has been rejected by her husband for a younger woman.

Identification of a Woman and *Beyond the Clouds* connect Antonioni to Bunuel and Hitchcock; like the former's *That Obscure Object of Desire* and the latter's *Vertigo*, Antonioni's films analyze the heterosexual male's obsession with a rigid concept of romantic love and possession, and, like Bunuel and Hitchcock, Antonioni presents his work in a manner which is at times surrealist, foregrounding the bizarre intensity of the male's desires and fantasy. Antonioni's heightened stylization and dialogue (in one episode the young woman Malkovich encounters abruptly announces her recent crime of patricide) and precise use of location link him to a style of European filmmaking practice which blends the realism of the documentary mode with fictional film conventions. In addition, as in the Bunuel and Hitchcock films, Antonioni's critique of his male figures is complicated by his affinity with the male protagonist and his voice.

Identification of a Woman and *Beyond the Clouds* appropriate the traditional concern for finding a language and story to communicate their meaning. These films continue the meditation on filmmaking practices that reached its height in the post-war European art film. Antonioni self-consciously explores narrative essentials: What are the moments that take the viewer through the process of narrativity and how is the creation of characterization meaningful to the films' thematics? The works are self-critical, disciplined and uncompromising, and make some viewers uncomfortable; as we have said, it is a cinema that is at odds with contemporary post-modern film which can also distance the viewer but does so without threat and without making demands. Antonioni's two more recent films come from his attempt to question the viability of narrative filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s—the problems inherent in relationships, in constructing identification, in the director's responsibility of creating and finding a meaningful form of telling and communicating to a contemporary viewer. Seeing these two films reminds one of Antonioni's intensely expressive use of a visual aesthetic—it is what defines his work and keeps it vital



CONTRIBUTORS

SCOTT FORSYTH teaches in the departments of film and video and political science at York University in Toronto.

MONICA HULSBUS is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Southern California in the Critical Studies program, department of Film and TV. Her publications include issues regarding new technologies, nations and nationalisms and postcoloniality.

FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ teaches film studies at Atkinson College, York University.

SHELLY KRAICER writes about Chinese cinema whenever he is not trying to memorize more Chinese characters. His articles on contemporary Hong Kong, Taiwanese and mainland films can be found on the web at <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/5170/>.

RICHARD LIPPE teaches film studies at Atkinson College, York University.

DAVID THOMAS LYNCH recently completed his MFA in film and video at York University.

SUSAN MORRISON is an art teacher in Toronto.

EDWARD R. O'NEILL is currently completing his Ph.D. in Critical Studies at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. He has published widely on topics related to queer theory, and he also does work on television, violence and reflexivity.

JULIAN STRINGER is a graduate film student at Indiana University-Bloomington.

PATRICK TAN is a Toxicology major at the University of Toronto. He is also working on his fledgling 3D animation studio with a few friends. Being an expatriate from the former British Crown Colony of Malaysia, he is in the unique position of having been raised in an amalgamated culture of both eastern and western sensibilities.

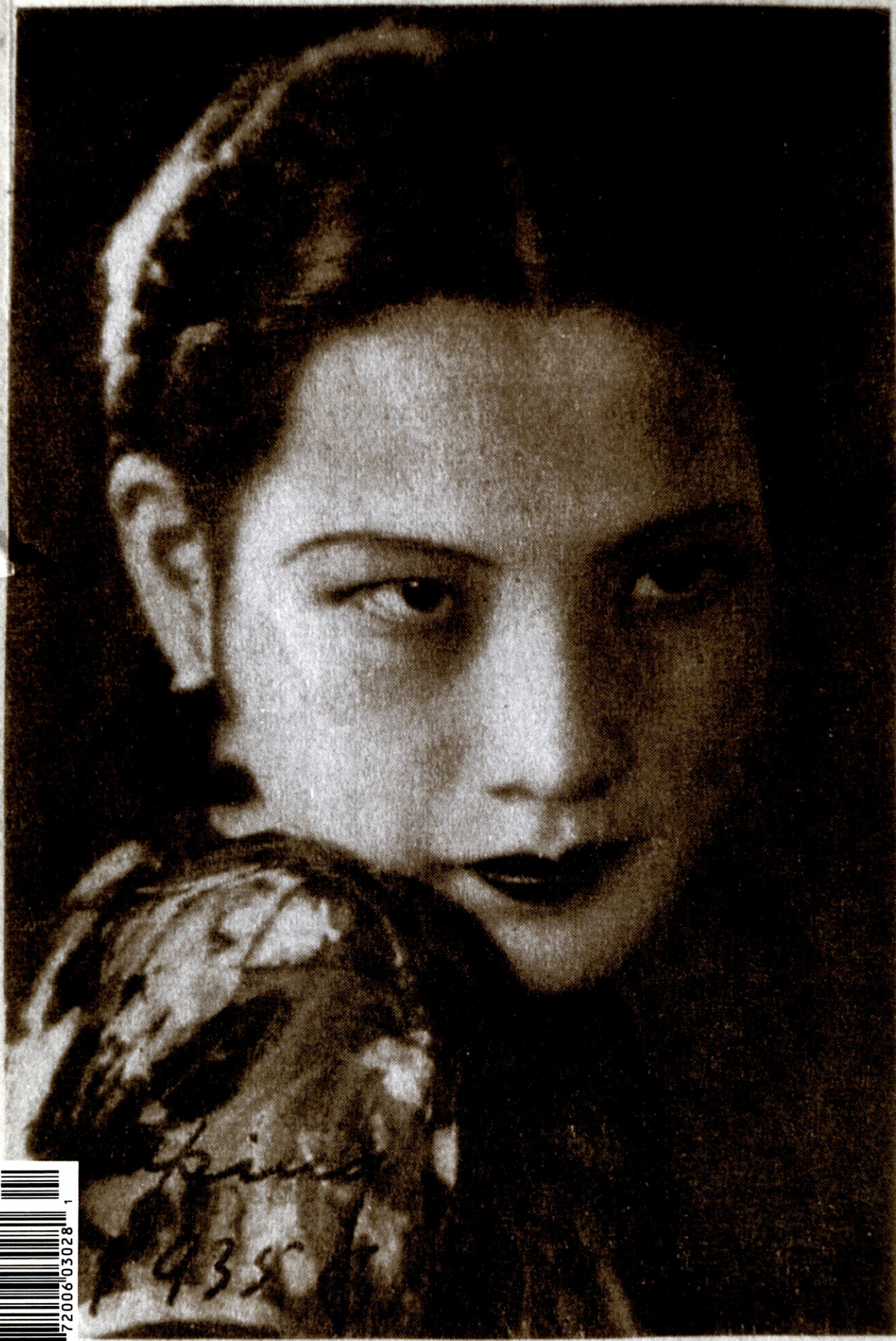
YANMEI WEI is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at SUNY at Stony Brook. She is writing a dissertation on the construction of femininity and mother-daughter relationships in contemporary Chinese fiction and film.

JERRY WHITE is a graduate student in Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, where he also teaches Film Studies. Despite his quest for Canadian identity, he remains a Pirates fan.

TONY WILLIAMS teaches cinema studies in the department of English at Southern Illinois University. He is the author of *Jack London: The Movies*, the forthcoming *Hearths of Darkness* and co-author of *Vietnam War Films*.



胡



Handwritten text:
Spring
935

